

Dark Horizons



*'Highly recommended for those interested in traditional
supernatural fiction.'* Ellen Datlow

Dark Horizons 44

Autumn/Winter 2003

edited by Debbie Bennett

Dark Horizons

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Issue 44
Autumn/Winter 2003

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Editorial

Debbie Bennett

OK, so last issue was a bit on the thin side, I admit. And it had a few glitches as well, for which I apologise. Strange gaps on the pages were down to me as for some reason my master copy – *Yes, in Word. No, I don't have and can't afford a decent DTP package. No, I don't want one as Word produces pretty much everything I've ever done for the BFS and most of it looks just as professional as Pagemaker would have done* – didn't convert into PDF properly. Blank pages were down to a fault with the actual printer, but rest assured that there was nothing missing – some issues just had extra blank pages added.

So this issue is extra thick to make up for it, with lots of quality stories and illustrations. And I apologise again for anyone who has sent me stories recently as I have been inundated with submissions and they are all sat on the top shelf of my desk looking at me and making me feel guilty. I will get around to sorting them, but am at present (as you are reading this) drowning in preparations for *FantasyCon 2003* – the BFS annual convention on November 21-23 in a very nice hotel in Stafford – which I am co-organising. So if you want to come along and meet many of the authors in this and other issues of *Dark Horizons*, plus other genre authors, fans, media people, agents and editors, then check out www.britishfantasysociety.org.uk for further details, or email me for a registration pack.

I've been back writing myself in recent months, after a long drought of new job, family, decorating, part-time college course and any other excuses I could come up with over the past few years! I've even had a go at scriptwriting – no doubt the BBC will let me know how successful that one was. But I've always had a great admiration for short story writers. I've written a few myself and even had them published, but I've never been able to produce them on demand and to a consistently high quality. It takes skill to tell a story in so few words. I feel privileged to say that in the time I've been editing this anthology, I've met and published many new authors, some of which I truly believe will be the genre novelists of tomorrow. You read their work here first!

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Best Friends

Nina Allan

Three weeks following their move to the new house, and Peter felt that he should have been more pleased about Clara. Rosie had always been rather a shy child, someone who found it hard to talk to strangers. A friend like Clara should have been a wonderful thing. But Pete was worried, all the same.

'She's round here all the time,' he said to Liz on the first Sunday in April. 'Hasn't she got a home to go to?'

'Don't be silly,' said Liz, passing him another plate to dry. 'Every little girl needs a best friend. It's how we pass the time at that age. Don't you remember me and Laura Cartwright?'

Her voice was soft and yet determinedly insistent. It reminded Pete of the voice that she had used on Rosie when the time had finally come for her to begin at school. Peter had known Elisabeth Merrick from the age of ten, and so it would have been all but impossible for him not to remember Laura Cartwright, who had been Liz's own best friend until they were both eighteen. Laura had been the tallest girl in the school, six foot two when she started at Cambridge. She had often worn high heels, too, on top of that. She had had an incredible sense of humour. They still saw her sometimes, but things had changed. Laura's husband had been killed in a car crash, leaving her in charge of a business and two tiny children. It meant that she was often short of time. In a rare moment of introspection, Liz had once told him that she was almost ashamed of letting Laura see their happiness. 'It feels like I betrayed her,' she had said. 'As if I somehow left her behind.'

In any case, the thing with Clara really had nothing to do with Laura. Not for the first time since they had taken possession of the new house, Pete discovered that he was thinking about James. The space that James still occupied inside his head was black and furry, like the box of darkness underneath a bed. He knew that it was there, but he didn't like to look at what there was inside. He grimaced slightly, as if he had just eaten something nasty by mistake, some acrid, foreign food that he could never normally be brought to touch.

'Rosie needs bringing out of herself,' he said plunging both hands beneath the cooling, soap-capped waters of the orange washing up bowl. He brought up a handful of cutlery that had sifted to the bottom, part of a Georgian set that had once belonged to his grandmother. It sometimes felt strange to him, seeing the silver laid out on his own dining table as if he owned it. He still remembered it best as it had looked on his grandparents' table at Christmas, the long white handles glimmering in the light of the candles like a giant's matchsticks, or toothpicks, or other bits of bone.

'She's fine, Pete,' said Liz, and Peter saw that his wife was smiling. 'She's happy. You wouldn't want to make her other than that, would you? She's growing up. You have to start to trust in what she feels.'

Clara was letting Rosie show her the garden again. 'Your trees have catkins,' she said, as she tipped her head backwards to look up into the willow trees. The branches arched upwards and then out, arms across the sky as if to protect them from the rain. For a moment, Rosie came upon the idea that Clara was not a little girl at all, but a child of the willows. The long arms and legs that seemed to bend and stretch so easily in the wind could almost have been willow branches; the soft but heavy, greenish-yellow hair was like a fall of leaves. Her eyebrows were soft and downy, like catkins on her face.

'What are catkins,' said Rosie, who already knew, but who liked to have Clara tell her things. She could never entirely predict what Clara might have to tell her, what new and awful thing.

'They are the candles that fairies have inside their chandeliers,' said Clara dreamily. 'The willow tree is like a great big shop where the fairies come to choose the catkins that they like the best. Then, when the fairy tells them to, they can make a light, a special yellow light. Apart from that, they're just the seed that makes the tree. We could try to see it, if you wanted.'

'You mean, see the light?' said Rosie. She felt afraid, but not all the way afraid. Being with Clara often made her feel like that: stronger somehow, and more awake, but also more aware of danger.

'On some nights you can,' said Clara in a way that made it sound as if she had already lost interest in the idea of trees and fairy lights. 'But we don't have to.'

They stopped talking about it and went on up the garden to the wooded place at the back, behind the wall of bushes with the shiny green leaves and pink flowers, where Rosie's father had promised he would build them a den. Rosie had asked for a tree house but her father had said that that would be too dangerous. So they were having a den instead.

'With real window and a door that locks?' Rosie had pleaded.

'The House that Dad Built,' her father had said. Then he had rubbed at her left cheek with his own wet finger, wiping off a smear of mud that had got onto her from somewhere in the garden. The mud had gone dark brown and then come away completely, leaving an itchy patch of bright white skin that she could see quite clearly if she looked at it from right beneath her lashes. She could feel that her father was worried about her, but she couldn't tell what he might be afraid of. She knew already that adult people weren't all that used to being frightened. She wondered sometimes where the fear might go to, and when it decided you were too grown up to need it any more.

Elisabeth loved the new house and Peter was proud of it with a pride that he found quite alien to his nature. Normally he lived contentedly within the world and watched it go, watched it run. He had never made any attempt at trying to

master it. The house was different; he had worked himself towards it, had seen it as a goal. He didn't usually hold with making plans because, somewhere deep within him, he believed that to do so was to turn yourself into little more than a one-man army. Being too intent on following your own orders made you stop noticing things. It made you somehow unaware of the shifting air currents of your own life, blind to dangers and unforgiving of new directions.

James had been a planner, a master-planner. Pete had always found that difficult to forget.

The house wasn't very far from the street in which Peter and Elisabeth had both grown up, but it was one of the 'impossible' houses, one of the places that neither of them had entered as children and could never have hoped to. In the days when they and their other friends had ridden their bicycles all over the village and roller-skated on all the secret paths that linked their houses, places like that had seemed more like miniature palaces than homes that anyone might live in. They had made their owners into witches and deemed the gardens the domain of trolls. Peter wondered if that made him a wizard now, some vengeful warlock with a special name given to him by the children, a name that only they would know. The village, however, seemed quieter of children than it had been in his youth. He supposed that everyone was moving to the cities, like they said.

The interior was still old-fashioned and unaltered, a set of rooms that led each one from the other. The estate agent had seemed embarrassed and talked hurriedly of change, but Liz had loved the inconvenient intricacy from the first, as if accepting the house's silent invitation to let herself be Ariadne. Peter knew that she had already ordered different wallpaper for each of the comfort-sized rooms, paper that would make them into gardens of buttercups, musk-roses, clover leaves. She had picked out a paper for Rosie's room that she hadn't shown her yet, that was going to be a surprise. The paper was alive with fairies, fairies dressed in torn-off parts of leaves and flowers, all of them busy with making their homes inside the many hidden hollows of an infinite oak tree. When Liz had shown him the sample, Pete had smiled up at her, hoping that Rosie wouldn't become afraid of it at night.

Rosie was proud of her new and sunny bedroom, but Peter had already seen that it was the garden that she really loved. Their previous house had had a garden too, of course, but it had been of the proportions and type most befitting to a simple terraced house: a thin strip of mostly brownish grass that might have been more suitable for the nurturing of rabbits. Rosie had never seemed to take much notice of it, preferring to play quietly in her room, building bright red castles out of plastic bricks and making preliminary skirmishes into the variously infinite land of books. But from the day they had first opened the back doors of the car and released their daughter into her new environment, Rosie had allowed herself to become intimate with the garden there in a way that suggested the awakening of something new and vitally alive within her. She had insisted on knowing the names of all the leaves. She was on speaking terms with the beetles and the snails.

It meant that she was like him. But now Rosie had a new best friend and she wanted her father to build them both a den. Pete's heart had lurched in his chest at the thought of a tree house, but he couldn't see any reasonable way out of making them the den, the little wooden house with the real glass windows and the door that could be locked. He thought now of the way it had been when he had always known where Rosie would be, that she would be in her warm and yellow room upstairs, and found that that had been a good thing to know.

And it was not the garden, really; that had been his gift to her. It was the private space within it that she chose to share with Clara.

Another week, and Peter told himself that he had been stupid if he had expected to come back to the village and have no memories of James. Until James had died and he had started to become friendly with Elisabeth Merrick from along the street, James had been what the village had been about. James had been Pete's best friend.

There had been the usual bunch of boys at school who had liked murdering insects and taking it in turns to set fire to anything they found that would fit comfortably into somebody's father's oldest tin bucket. James had not been one of them. He had been put into James's class on the first day at the big school, the place where everybody had to go the year they turned eleven, and Peter noticed him immediately because he sat alone. Sitting alone might not have been so unusual had James appeared to dislike it; that would have meant only that nobody liked him. But the straight, attentive way that James sat in his seat made Pete think that the boy had somehow found the place he had to be.

There were other boys, of course, who were mostly left alone. Spidery Stephen Speck, who everyone called Doctor Spock, was one of them, and also Rabbit Harry, who had been born with a hare lip. If you looked really carefully you could still see a minutely thin white line of scarring where they had sewn it back together when he had been a baby. Pete always felt vaguely, guiltily sorry for these unfortunates, but he never felt sorry for James because James did not give him anything to be sorry about. He was a square, solid boy, but did not trespass on the boundaries of fatness. He wore glasses, but they were dark-rimmed and almost stylish. They also looked expensive, like the glasses their headmaster put on whenever he was seeing somebody in his study. James was not, quite, the oldest boy in class, but he looked as if he was. That fact in itself seemed to set him apart, as if his otherness were something inborn.

'I'm going to look for conkers,' James had said to Pete at lunchtime break on the second day. 'Coming?' Peter had liked the idea of searching for conkers, but he found himself hesitating all the same. At the time he had put it down to shyness, but he knew now that he had hesitated because becoming friendly with James had seemed like a big decision. He had, in his heart, been wondering if being James's friend would make contact with all the other more ordinary boys impossible and laughable, forbidden. Behind the expensive and carefully chosen spectacles, James's gaze had been steady but non-intrusive. He wasn't going to

force it. In the end, Pete had gone because he found he lacked the courage to say no.

James had led the way up the playing field to where three great horse chestnuts grew, on the other side of the hedgerow that divided the territory of the school from that of the risibly upmarket Meredith Mead Estate.

'I often think that all the best conkers must fall on the other side of this hedge,' James had said as he examined the first find of that day, a pitifully small conker with a cracked and wizened skin. 'I wish we could go round there and find out.'

Peter was to discover that this was the essence of James, wanting to find things out, and supposed that it was really this offbeat desire that made him different from his other, lazier, classmates. In the end, by the process of mutual and silent consent that has evolved in all classrooms everywhere, it was decided that James was not ugly enough to be routinely picked upon. Nor was he arrogant enough to be levelled by more than the occasional shout of 'boffin.' James was gradually assimilated into the role of class eccentric, laughed at only by his own.

Peter, as things turned out, had been allowed to commute fairly easily between the world of the games pavilion and the world of James Farrington. Peter was rather good at football, had a very pretty sister, and was downright disastrous when it came to mathematics. These things, if nothing else, had made him safe.

'They're using us to babysit their daughter,' said Peter, doing his best to sound angry. It was a reason, after all, a reason they could have to stop Clara from coming. Elisabeth wouldn't like to be taken advantage of.

'We've only been here six weeks,' said Liz, dipping the wide black brush into the pot of sun-coloured paint and running it in one smooth stroke along the bit of the wall that lay just above the skirting board. 'She must have found something to do with herself before we arrived. They like being together, that's all. Haven't you noticed how confident Rosie's getting? Having a best friend must make her feel really special, really important. I think it's sweet.' The brush seemed almost to glide along under its own momentum, hovering six inches above the floorboards like a great, impossibly hairy wasp. Pete followed it automatically with his eyes, wondering as he always did how she was able to use such a large brush and yet conspire never to spill a drop. Not confident, closed off, he thought. Closed off and completely private from her father. Sometimes it's as if I can't feel her mind moving any more.

Liz bent her head over the paintpot again, filling her world with yellow. Pete turned away from her towards the window. Outside, the sky was still managing to be blue. Clara's parents, it seemed, were a doctor and a landscape gardener, always on the go. Liz and Pete had not so far been able to meet them.

'My mummy says is it alright for me to stay to tea,' the little girl would say, appearing at Liz's side in the kitchen with her metallic, hazel eyes and her voice all high and brittle like her green-gold, cornsilk hair. 'She says that if it's not, she'll send Auntie Jemima to come and get me.' Pete thought that her voice should

have sounded like the tinkling of tiny silver bells, only it didn't, not really. It reminded him instead somehow of the relentless whine of mosquitoes in the night. I wonder if any aunt would really come, Pete would think to himself as he watched Liz touch the child lightly on the top of her easily-breakable skull and assure her that of course it was alright, and did she like ginger muffins.

The big house had meant, of course, that there would now be room for another baby, but so far that didn't seem to be happening. For the moment, Liz looked like pretending that she already had two daughters. Peter had noticed himself starting to be careful of what he said or even thought. It disturbed him almost more than she did, the way he didn't like her. He wasn't used to disliking people. It really wasn't his thing.

'One day I'm going to go to South America, or Australia. Probably both,' James had said. 'That's where all the really big spiders are.' He had found a web, a perfect orb-web of the kind most often seen in cartoons of haunted houses, or the half-hopeful, half-fearful drawings made by children. Although the shower had long-since passed, a single drop of rain still hung glitteringly suspended on one of its outer strands. It looked like treasure. James picked a blade of grass and tapped it gently against one of the silken runners that bound the web into place on the rosebush. He explained to Pete that he was doing this to tempt the spider out into the open. 'It'll think that it's caught a fly,' he said. It was exactly the kind of thing that James knew how to do. In less than a minute the spider had indeed appeared, hauling itself up from the dark green depths on a rope that it kept spinning as it went, going hand over hand like some minutely obese, brown-skinned ape creature. Pete had shuddered in awe and soft repulsion, not knowing how to decide whether what he was seeing was beautiful or monstrous. There was a broken cross on its back, like the quick dashes of icing on the top of a hot cross bun. It hung there at the centre of the prison it had made, motionless and looking disappointed. Pete had asked himself whether such a thing would be able to experience the luxury of anger.

'*Aranis diademata*,' said James, stroking the spider briefly with the blade of grass. It extended all its legs, languidly, like a cat before a fire. 'The Garden Cross Spider. It's very pretty,' he added, seeming to need no qualification of this from Pete. He drew out the small black notebook that he always carried in his pocket and wrote in the date, where they were, and the Latin name that Pete had already forgotten in his quick, neat hand. 'Did you know that there are almost six hundred species of spiders in the British Isles alone?'

Pete didn't of course, and by tomorrow he would probably have forgotten again. It was James, after all, who was going to be the famous explorer, so naturally it was his business to look things up and then remember them. Peter liked just to watch, and listen, and be aware of the sun. He didn't know yet what he wanted to be. He had wondered what it might be like to be James, to know one's destiny and even now to be working towards it. He had supposed that that was why James so rarely had any time for games.

She had come to them during their first week at the new house; it might have been as early as their third day. Pete remembered that he and Elisabeth had been unpacking glasses, unwrapping them out of the bottomless nests of newspaper and putting them for safety into the living room sideboard.

'I'll wash them all later,' Liz had said. 'Let's just try and get rid of some of this mess.' Pete had held one of the Dartington champagne flutes up against the light, loving for perhaps the fiftieth time the particular shade of blue they made when brought into conjunction with the sun. The glasses had been given to them as a wedding present by Elisabeth's Aunt Hilda. He had hardly known Hilda, and she was dead now, but her glasses were still beautiful, and the set was still unbroken. He let a shaft of April sunshine come at him through the window and smash itself to pieces on the hard circle of frozen imp-light. Through the glass beyond the glass, he could see that Rosie was talking to someone at the garden gate.

When at last he reached them, he was relieved at first to see that it was only another child, a girl-child not much taller than his Rosie.

'This is Clara,' Rosie had said. 'Can she come in to play?'

'Good afternoon, Mr Apperley,' said the girl. She was so precociously well-spoken that Pete turned towards her with hardened eyes, half-convinced that he was being made a joke of. At the proper sight of her, something inside Peter stirred and then turned over. It had nothing to do with the girl's beauty. He was used to beauty. His sister Evie had been beautiful with the kind of loveliness that had made others stop and stare at her in the street. This girl was different. This girl was — fey.

'Hello, Clara,' he had said then. 'Where do you live?'

'Over there.' She waved her overlong, elfin arm vaguely in the direction of the high hedging bordering the road. Wedged between it and the further distance, one could see the squarish, grey roofs that had to belong to the houses beyond. It had been impossible for him to turn the child away, not in front of Rosie.

'How old are you, Clara?' he had asked as he leant over to unlatch the gate. She looked seven, she looked nine, she looked one hundred. He knew that he was crazy.

'Seven,' she replied. 'But I'm going to be eight next month.' She took Rosie's hand and jumped from the gravelled drive onto the soft matt green of the grass. In another moment they had both run, giggling, into the bushes. Pete moved back in the direction of the house. Elisabeth was standing at the window, holding tightly onto a hideous fake German beer stein that they had won once at a goose fair and could never quite bear to throw away. As Pete drew closer, he could see that she was beaming.

Pete would always drive Clara home if she had stayed with them long enough for it to have started to get dark outside. The use of the car seemed ridiculous for a drive that was supposed to be only a five-minute walk, but appearing alone on the

open street with a girl not his daughter felt almost as wrong to Pete as the idea of turning her out into the night. If she didn't stay so late she'd be able to go by herself, he always thought. She could go by herself anyway. Nothing would dare to come near her.

'I want to go too!' Rosie would always beg.

'It's bedtime,' he would say, almost without a smile. The other girl would go with him then, opening the door and stepping into the car almost as if she owned it, but throughout the drive she would be silent, staring straight ahead into the darkness. It was like sharing the car with another adult, someone with whom he was no longer on speaking terms. It made Peter shiver inside, the speed with which this situation seemed to have arisen. Liz had told him that she was just being shy.

'Do you want me to go to the door with you?' Pete asked stiffly as he drew the car to a halt in the road outside Clara's house. The house, its details invisible in the darkness, was of a similar size to their own, but to Pete it felt as if it had a squatter, darker aspect.

'No thank you, Mr Apperley. There's a light on, look.' She pointed at the porch, where a yellowish bulb hung in an archway and glimmered. Now that the drive was over she was pretending again, pretending to be nice. He waited in the car while she slammed the door behind her and went off up the path. He could see her hands, like spindly white spiders, moving the darkness aside as she went. She did not run, as Rosie would have done. Her walk was the demure high stepping of a tiny actress leaving a crowded stage. As soon as she reached the porch she seemed to disappear inside. It was impossible for Pete to tell whether the inner door had perhaps been opened for her, or simply been left on the latch.

Pete drove away, knowing that his thoughts were of the kind that you imparted to nobody, no matter how much you thought you loved them. He had grown, with the years, so unused to the sensation that he had trouble recognising it as fear.

Rosie hadn't much minded having to leave their old house. Her mother had told her that it would be better for them all to move now, before Rosie had to start at the big school, and that she shouldn't be sorry about the people she had to leave behind because she'd soon make new friends. Rosie hadn't said anything to her mother, but the truth was that she hadn't been sorry to leave them, not at all. She still remembered the day on which Louise Bathgate had taken her rubber that was in the shape of a cat, and afterwards had told Mrs Branningan that she hadn't even seen it. Beryl and Ruby Mason, two sisters who always had runny noses, had backed her into a corner and told her that if she said anything, they'd make her sorry for it later. Rosie couldn't ever imagine anything like that happening with Clara. Clara made up for everything.

Rosie sat up in bed and spread her hands out in front of her, like the open hearts of two pale pink flowers. The fingers were short and slightly curved, the squarish, faintly padded palms were the same colour as her name. Clara's hands

were so different, so light and so white. When Rosie had pointed this out, Clara had only laughed, catching up Rosie's little red hand in her own long white one and kissing it. 'You mustn't think like that,' she had said, right into Rosie's face so that not a single word could be lost. 'Each fairy is different in its own special way.'

When Rosie had protested that they weren't, after all, fairies, Clara had told her that she couldn't be sure of this, since she'd never met a fairy before. Thinking about it now, Rosie was bound to admit that there could be something in what her friend had said. She turned out her bedside light and lay back against the nest of pillows that she always made for herself at night. The covers were freshly washed, and smelt of the liquid that her mother had said was called Country Fresh. It came from a green bottle in the shape of a slipper with a picture of daisies on the side. She had always loved that smell, but now that she was living in the country herself, Rosie knew that it didn't smell the same as actual woods and fields. The real country had a slightly muddy, green-and-brown smell that she wasn't sure that she would want in her bedroom at all, or on her clothes. It was the pillowcases that she wanted now, with their sweetly sleepy smell of night-time and familiar warmth.

Rosie knew that she was falling asleep. Before she went, she held on fast to the dull grey voices that came from the television in the living room, wanting to stay close to her parents for as long as possible. She could imagine that there was another sound, too, coming from somewhere further away. It sounded as if someone were softly calling her name – Ro-sie, Ro-sie – in a deep, silver voice that was like the chiming of a soft and heavy bell. The voice seemed to be something sent by moonlight. She fell towards it, riding softly as a dragon on a cloud, wondering what it was about her new best friend that her father couldn't bring himself to like.

It had begun to seem possible, even probable, to Pete that Clara didn't actually exist at all. How many times, he wondered, did one hear of children having imaginary playmates, invisible companions who joined them in the dramas they constructed, impossible scenarios of guilt, betrayal, love, blood-comradeship, and war? If he and Liz could see the creature too, that only meant that they were close to Rosie. Close enough to see a ghost-child, if that was really what their little daughter needed.

Pete shook himself, continuing to watch them from beneath his brows as he worked. The soil turned in his hands, cascading from the white steel platter of the spade in a way that reminded him of dark, dry cocoa in a tin. Rosie was kneeling in the centre of the lawn with her pink checked dress spread out around her in a sweet, bright corona that entirely hid her knees. She looked like Thumbelina, in the fairy tale. Clara stepped carefully all round Rosie in a great circle of exaggerated strides, as if marking off a piece of territory. Her strange green hair, which should have been beautiful but which unfailingly reminded Peter of seaweed, slapped out and back against the slight curve of her spine as she went,

like a rainsoaked banner against a flagpole. It seemed that she was counting.

'It's magic!' he suddenly, clearly heard Clara say. He started backwards, almost dropping the spade into the dirt. If she had been looking at him, the girl had turned away. She continued in her striding, in her counting, staring straight ahead and seemingly at nothing.

Peter had never told anyone about what had happened to James. People knew, everybody knew, that James Farrington had died, that James Farrington had been his best friend. Nobody had been to blame. They had wanted to comfort him, but he had kept himself apart. When things had finally drifted and then settled, it was felt that there was nothing left to know.

They had found James at nine o'clock in the evening, their torches all switched on even though there was still enough light in the high May sky to see by, even though it was all already too late.

'It just seems so strange,' Pete had overheard his mother whispering to his father on the day after James had died. 'I can barely believe that James didn't know how to swim. He knew just about everything else about the water.'

Pete hadn't known that either. Pete himself had learnt to swim when he was a little over five years old, and it had become so natural to him that he had scarcely considered the fact that there might be people around who didn't know how to do it. Even had Pete known, there could surely have been little chance that his knowledge would have saved his friend from drowning; the rotten wooden bridge would, after all, still have been there, and he, Pete, would not. People had been kind to him for months afterwards, kinder even than was usual.

They had left the school together on that afternoon, as they so often had before. The day had still been warm, with that wide-eyed, blue-skied warmth of early Summer that is always certain to last until well into the evening. Peter always reminded himself that he had really been in a hurry to get home. He was looking forward to continuing work on the giant-sized model of Dracula's castle that he was intent on building out of Lego. It was his own design, nothing to do with anything you could find in the Lego ideas book, and would consist of literally thousands of bricks when it was finally completed. It was going to have a fully working drawbridge, and a turret with a coffin inside that you would be able to peer at through a tiny barred window. Pete had already had nightmares about somebody knocking it over before it was finished. He had shown the castle to James of course, and James had seemed to admire it, but Pete could tell that he hadn't been held captive by it in the same way that he himself was. He thought that this was probably because, on the whole, James wasn't particularly keen on horror films unless they had giant spiders or plagues of rats in them, things like that. They just weren't his thing.

'I'm going over to Buttress Meadows,' James had said, looking up at the spotless sky with a grin that was pure pleasure. 'The caterpillars should all be hatched by now. I was thinking of taking a few of them home, to hand-rear. Do you want to come?' He rattled his schoolbag, which had been one of those old-

fashioned teacher's briefcases. Pete had always thought it looked like a giant doctor's bag. He knew that it usually contained as many collecting boxes and hand-magnifiers as it did schoolbooks. Peter had wanted very badly to go, but not, in the end, as much as he'd wanted to get on with his castle

· · · 'We're still going to the Ponds on Saturday, aren't we?' he had asked, and James had nodded, not knowing that there would not now be any Saturday. Not, at least, for him.

'I'm halfway through the Grand Staircase,' Peter had said then, longingly, and James had reached out a hand to brush across his shoulders in exactly the way a boy in a book might have behaved.

'See you tomorrow,' he said. 'I'll bring one in to show you.'

Caterpillar, Pete realised as he moved off down the road. That's what he means to bring in. Pete loved James's collection of antique glass pillboxes, all of them kept as scrupulously clean as the lenses of his impressively expensive spectacles. James's dad had got the pillboxes for him at an auction in London, James had told him once. They had belonged to a nineteenth century naturalist, someone who had made his career in India. Peter thought that the naturalist would have loved the idea of the boxes still being used. James had smiled, when Pete had told him that, and that had made Pete glad.

Peter hadn't known any of the boys personally, just some of their names. They were all in the year above, in Mr Mason's class. Nearly everybody was a little bit scared of Mr Mason, and that was why his form had always contained a fair proportion of the school's more difficult boys. Pete had only just turned out of Bradon Road, where the school was sited, when he saw them. They stood in a loose group at the corner of the street, ties stuffed into their pockets and blazers slung over their shoulders or tied carelessly around their waists, like backwards aprons. Andrew Gilman was smoking a cigarette.

As Pete passed them by, he heard them laughing, but he didn't think that it was about him. He'd played football over at Andy's place a couple of times, after all. Mike Harding glanced briefly over his shoulder at him, but that was all. They obviously had other things on their minds, or other people. As he walked away, Pete thought he heard something about glasses, something about a four-eyed loser, but that couldn't have been him either; he had never had to wear spectacles, like James. Peter had already reached the end of the road when he heard Andy Gilman shout 'boffin hunt!' There was a chorus of approving yells from the others, and then they were gone, speeding back in the direction from which Pete had so recently come, seeming to scent the fragrant May air like a pack of grey-clad dogs.

It wasn't that they killed James, they never even caught him. There wasn't a mark on his body except for the cuts and grazes inflicted by the splintering, rotten wood of the old bridge as he fell. It was rather that they left him there, left him to drown. Pete doubted that they had known that James couldn't swim. He doubted that Andy had ever been that bad. They would simply have seen him, struggling and spluttering in the swiftly-moving water underneath the remnants of the

disused footbridge, and then run away laughing. It was a brilliant joke, that was all, a far better punishment than anything they might have dared administer themselves.

Pete had made a single backwards movement with his head, as if checking their direction, and then gone home to his Lego castle. He didn't feel like meddling with Andy, not that day. It would be stupid.

The police questioned a lot of people, but that was by way of being a formality. There was nothing to indicate that James had been pushed, or otherwise hurt, before he drowned.

'Did James seem alright when you left him at the school gates?' the policewoman had asked. Her voice had been strangely soft and gentle, like that of a hospital nurse.

'He was fine,' Pete had replied, nodding vigorously. 'He said he was going to Buttruss Meadows.'

'To collect caterpillars, yes. And what did you do then?'

'I went home. I was going to do some work on my castle.'

There was a verdict of Death by Misadventure. Pete broke down the castle and replaced all the individual bricks in their correct boxes. He had a wooden box for the white bricks, a large green and gold biscuit tin for the red ones, and a series of see-through plastic containers that held all the smooth tiles, mirror tiles, window frames and metal accessories. After about a month, he started to build a model of a space station, with detachable escape pods.

'James was so happy to have met you, to have had you for a friend,' said James's father, Roger Farrington, when he came up to speak to Peter after James's funeral. He was a taller, slightly thinner, version of James. His hair was just beginning to turn a silvery shade of grey. He taught mathematics at the local sixth form college. 'James never had many friends, but he was lucky to have had you.'

Maybe that was what imaginary friends really were, thought Pete. Ghosts. The spirits of dead children, wanting only to enjoy the swiftly transient pleasures of what we like to call a normal childhood. Living children would be able to see them because they were to young yet to have learnt any better.

Pete had parked his car in the road outside Clara's house. He sat immobile in the driver's seat, pretending to immerse himself in the Sunday papers. He wanted to look as if he might perhaps be waiting for someone. The house was quiet and displayed no signs of life. If he had been expecting his mere presence there to somehow cause Clara to appear, then he had been wrong. The houses to either side had their curtains still drawn, as most still would at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning, but at the windows of Clara's house the curtains hung loosely apart. If Pete had chosen to go any closer, he would have been able to see right into the rooms downstairs.

It came to him then that the house was deserted, that nobody had lived in it for years. The girl running – no, walking – up to the back steps, the light on in the

porch — these were the things that he expected to see, and so he saw them. Now, in daylight, the lean-to roof covering the porch was shabby and grey, like the decaying roofs belonging to the tin-pot houses in the shanty towns one sometimes saw on the television news. The curtains in the windows were of a colourless shade of beige, like the cobwebs that might festoon an attic. It all stood there unmoving in the directionless air of Sunday morning. Pete almost felt he had it in him to leap from the car and hammer a tattoo upon the obstinately shut, scabby blue door, just so that something might happen.

In the end, he stepped out onto the empty pavement and crossed the street, heading back in the direction of the newsagents that he'd visited earlier.

'My life wouldn't be worth living if I'd forgotten these,' he said, smiling broadly, falsely, at the colourless young woman behind the cash register. He laid a pony magazine and two chocolate bars on the counter and reached into his pocket for some loose change. He thought about Rosie being inside and reading the pony magazine, eating the chocolate as she turned the pages. It might be a good idea to set her up with some riding lessons. Neither he nor Elisabeth had ever learned to ride.

'Lovely old place just down the road there. Blue trim,' he said. His hands still seemed to be lost in his pockets. He looked down at them, wishing he hadn't left his wallet behind in the car.

'The Parkertons', said the woman, taking the handful of coins Pete finally held out to her and sorting them carefully into sizes, as if they were cogs, or nails, or nuts and bolts. 'We don't see much of them in here. She's a doctor, you know.' She slammed the till shut, as if there was something about Pete's money that had not been entirely satisfactory. Pete wandered away towards the door. He didn't see that he could start asking questions about a little girl. It might have sounded a bit peculiar.

Her mother was calling her from the kitchen door, calling her in for tea. 'Ro-sie! Ro-sie!' Her voice made a high, jarring sound that could have almost been the barking of a new kind of dog. It was nothing like the soft, silver voice that called her name at night, tolling gently like the low, sweet music of a distant bell. She had listened to the sound every night for a fortnight before confiding in Clara. She hesitated to share her secret, for it seemed like hers alone, but in the end, talking about it to her best friend Clara seemed to be the wisest thing to do. It seemed likely to Rosie that this was exactly the sort of thing that Clara might know about.

'It's the fairies' bell,' she had said, without any pause for thought or fabrication. 'They ring it whenever they're coming close to crowning a new queen. Why, do you think it might be you?' There had been a sort of laughing shine in her eyes when she said this, although Rosie had never felt that Clara was laughing at her before, even though she was a whole year older.

Rosie sat still and listened to her mother calling. The den was all but finished, a box-house made of tightly-fitting wooden boards built directly into the natural hollow between the thick green shrubs and the tall back fence. It was somewhere



you could hide. Slowly, she traced her finger around the outline of the picture she was studying. Queen Liminiva, Ruler of the Summer Fairies. She sat resplendent at the centre of a rose, the yellow and purple folds of her gown cascading over the petals like some other, more exotic, portion of the flower. Rosie caressed the smooth coloured paper making up the page, imagining that the fabric of the dress would probably be silk, spiders' silk. Velvet would be far too hot for wearing in the Summer.

On the next page she knew that there was a picture of Queen Polandite, Ruler of the Winter Fairies. She was dressed in velvet, then wrapped around in a great fur cloak kept up out of the snow by a train of dancing voles. You couldn't see her face, because it stayed hidden behind a white, lacy veil that was made out of snowflakes. Rosie always saved looking at this picture until the very last moment, because she thought that the yellow-haired daughter of Queen Polandite, who was called Princess Dosimine, looked exactly like Clara. The fairy book, given to her by her rarely-visited Aunt Evie, was still Rosie's favourite, even though Clara had flicked through it once and then laid it aside as if it were something that she had once had herself and liked but had now grown out of.

'Those aren't real fairies,' she had said. 'Can't you tell? They're more like dolls. I think that's just to stop people from being afraid of them.'

Rosie got up and started making her way towards the sound of her mother's voice. She held the book clasped close against her chest, as if for protection. She would have liked to have been allowed to eat outside, in the den, but her father had said that the weather was still too cold. Her father always seemed to prefer it when she stayed inside.

Peter was dreaming. He knew he had to be dreaming, because he could see James walking up ahead of him, and James was dead. He was walking very fast, almost running, and it was hard for Pete to keep him clearly within his line of sight. Pete found himself thinking distractedly how unfair this was, seeing as it was he who had been good at sport and not James. James didn't even know how to swim. It was also unfair that James's body, which had not remained long enough on the earth to start transforming itself into the lean grey lines of his father, slipped easily in and out of the trees as if he were still just a boy. Pete started to run, determined that the striding figure ahead should not get away from him. A black, pouchy something bounced up and down on James's back as he went, and Pete knew that it was James's field-bag, crammed full of pill-boxes and the little, hand-size net for pond-dipping. No killing bottle, though; James had never been interested in killing.

'You can learn a lot more by looking than by collecting,' he had said. Pete had had a feeling close to love for him, hearing him say that, though he himself had swatted flies easily enough when they flew unwittingly into his face, and made a quick end of wasps if they strayed too close to his sandwiches at break time. James had never tried to tell him what to do.

James was still clearly visible amongst the trees, but Pete sensed that he was

getting further away rather than closer. He thought, too, that he could hear something coming up the path behind him, the sound of many running feet, perhaps. His own feet felt heavy and there was no way now that he would ever be able to catch up with his friend. He opened his mouth to call after him, to let him know at least that he was there, but no sound came. James was getting further and further away from him, seeming to glide through the dark, midnight air through no effort of his own. Then, as Pete came finally and disjointedly to a standstill, the boy on the path ahead turned slowly around and fixed his steady, blue-grey eyes on Pete's. James wore the same unguarded, uniquely happy smile he had always worn when about to greet his friend, but now Pete could see that there was something else there too, a calmness and a confidence that might have been content.

'You've got to get at the facts,' called James, still beaming. He tugged briefly at the thick leather strap that lay across his right shoulder, the strap of his heavy old collecting bag. 'In a case like this, the only way forward is to start with the facts!'

Pete tried again to shout back at him, but now there was only darkness, the green-smelling, vibrant darkness of a Summer woodland night. All at once he became aware that the woodland was the line of tall beeches that marked the furthest extent of his own back garden, and that his feet on the path had started to turn cold. He looked down then, and saw that they were bare. The grass they stood on had turned chilly with the morning fall of dew.

The woman standing on the doorstep was older than Peter had imagined, perhaps by as much as twenty years. If anyone had asked him, he would have said that he had expected to see someone comparable in age with himself and Elisabeth. If he had spoken honestly, he would have said that he had expected to see no-one at all.

The woman he saw there was probably close to being fifty years old. She was thin, but the continuing gracefulness of her movement ensured that she did not yet appear to be shrunken. Her hair was too pale to show the grey that had undoubtedly invaded it. The longer he looked at her the more certain Pete became that his initial, hurried impression – that this was a servant of some kind, the cleaning woman, maybe – had been a ridiculous error in his judgement. This woman was made to be Clara's mother.

'Yes,' she said. 'Can I help you?' Her voice was low and steady, with the merest hint of the aristocratic bite he had predicted. Her eyes were a misty bluish grey, the colour of a September sea. Peter supposed that she had once been very beautiful.

'Mrs Parkerton,' he said, as if remembering suddenly that he too had a voice. 'Or do you prefer to be called Dr Parkerton? It's lovely to meet you at long last. I'm Pete Apperley.' He held out his hand, but the woman did not take it. 'Rosie's dad,' he tried again, but the woman's face remained immobile. Pete could feel what was the unmistakeable prelude to a blush, a particular and uncomfortable tingling that always started in his earlobes. He felt like an impostor, standing

there, someone quite other than who he claimed to be.

'I brought this,' he said in desperation, holding out the thing that he had stolen as an excuse to be beside her. 'I think it's Clara's. She'll be missing it, I expect.'

It was a tortoiseshell alicé band that he held, a pretty thing, and maybe old. At the tip of each of the bevelled ends that would slide behind the ears of the girl who wore it was a gilded cockleshell motif. Pete knew that it was Clara's because he had seen her wearing it. He had also seen the way that Rosie looked at it, with the sort of dreamy covetousness that overtook her face whenever she was working her way up to asking him for something. He thought that Clara had probably given it to Rosie. It had been in her bedroom for three days before he had decided he must take it.

The ornament jutted from his closed palm like the twin poles of a magnet, like a lucky, variegated horseshoe. As the faint undertow of colour that had been there drained from the woman's face completely, Pete stared down at his hands, his heart awash with panic. All at once he was convinced that what he was holding must in fact be something else, some secretively chance abomination.

'Who are you?' asked the woman. Her voice had barely raised itself above its former low and steady hum, but her face, her elderly, unprotected face, looked somehow violated. 'If you're a journalist, I'd like you to go, now, please, before I have to call the police.'

She turned abruptly away from him, as if from something that had offended her eye, and Pete caught a momentary glimpse of a russet coloured carpet, a telephone table with barley-twist legs, and a flight of broad red stairs running steeply upwards into the dark. A single moment later and he was staring at the blank, blue rectangle that stood for the front door. It could have been a fine door, but the heavy brass furnishings had tarnished themselves to a deep ochre, and the vibrant, royal surface of its paintwork had been chipped and heavily scratched in several places. He stood there for almost a full minute, wondering what he should do, before it became finally apparent to him that he could do nothing. It would perhaps have been comforting to suppose that Dr Parkerton was mad, mad enough even for her eight year old daughter to feel shame at others' sight of it. Pete would have been happy to let himself think this, had he not known in his heart that the only thing afflicting the woman had been anger. Had she not been Parkerton at all, that would have been yet better. But she had not denied the name, and Pete knew his crime for one of trespass, not of error.

As he turned away, the garden before him was still, stiller than any Sunday ought to be, an envelope of frozen time. He retraced his steps along the path, trying to rid himself of the fancy that, should he be tempted to look back, he would find that he himself was captive in that stillness, a prisoner of immobility, that most commonplace of children's nightmares. Only the roses bordering the flagstones nodded as he passed them, their soft, sweet pinkness reminding him of home.

His house was empty, yet he crept around it like a thief. The girls and Liz

were gone; shopping, playing, picnicking – he did not know, for they had left no guiding sign for him to find. He sat down by the window and wondered what might happen when Rosie found her alic band was gone. The woman at the door had snatched it from him as she went inside, not as something she might want, but as something that was hers. She had not taken it, thought Pete, so much as taken it back, devouring it with her icy eyes as the one true something she had ever known. Perhaps there was a madness in her, after all.

Liz was hanging pictures, selecting images to compliment the newly lemon walls. She worked deftly and with assurance, as quietly confident as a dry stone waller Peter had seen once on TV. And some of the pictures she had chosen were indeed of sheep, a set of prints by a modern artist from Yorkshire. The wool of his sheep was the quivering pink often seen pulsing at the throats of woodpigeons, and the hills behind were cobalt blue like a colony of sleeping whales. The pictures looked impossible but right, as if the house had quickly learnt to trust her with itself. It made Pete feel clumsy, like an awkward child.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it, like something in a film.’ Elisabeth was suddenly beside him at the window, following his gaze towards the two small figures on the lawn. Clara was once again performing her slow, interminable pacing around Rosie, so seriously she might have been on stage. Rosie sat so still that it made Pete desperate to rattle the window in its frame, to make her flinch at the sound, just so he could see that she could move. There was a light, white crown of daisies placed on Rosie’s head, a single strand of flowers so innocently pure it made him wince.

‘Oh, damn,’ said Liz, looking at hr watch. ‘I think we’re out of eggs. Pete, I really wanted to make a cake for tea.’

‘I’ll go,’ he said. ‘You finish these.’ He moved out past her and towards the hall, jingling his car keys. Elisabeth squeezed his arm gently as he went by, making his insides jerk backwards and away.

He walked away from them all towards the car. Rosie seemed not to notice that he was leaving. Her eyelids flickered like those of somebody asleep and dreaming; the space above her head appeared to shimmer with the humming, forest greenness of her private thoughts. It’s as if she were bound to a tree, he thought desperately. Like a sacrificial lamb. Clara’s eyes found his, and he knew that she was seeing him, seeing him right down to the pit that was his stomach and the tangled, worm-like fantasies that grew there. She smiled her shiny, Meissen smile and touched Rosie lightly on the arm. Her eyes opened, the lashes sweeping upwards in a slow, wide, heavy arc. The look she gave him was unknowing, the drunken wandering of a sleeper lost in dreams.

‘Rosie’s lost my alic band,’ said Clara. Her voice was high and sweet like the chiming of a brittle glass bell. ‘We’re doing a spell, so that we’ll know where to find it again.’

By some miracle he found himself on the other side of the gate, and, minutes later, outside the shop, though he had noticed no other buildings on his journey.

'The girl,' he said, so stupidly, so bluntly, to the same colourless woman behind the counter, as he handed over the eggs, a newspaper, something wrapped in paper that looked like Rosie's favourite chocolate. 'Have you seen her?'

'Not your own little girl, Mr—?' Her monotonous tone was made syrupy with curiosity as speech is made lax by wine. 'She's not gone missing?'

'Oh. No, no,' said Pete, as the woman, disappointed, began ringing the prices of his paltry catches into the buttons of her till. 'I just wondered. Rosie doesn't have many friends here her own age. We saw — a girl, in the village.'

'I don't think she'd have been from around here, then. It's odd, that, Pearl, don't you think?'

She raised her head slightly as she spoke, and another woman, whom Pete had not noticed at all as he hurried amongst the shelves, slid forth as if on castors from behind a row of cereal packets. The wire basket by her side was overflowing with packets of soup, held precariously in place by a copy of the next week's TV Times.

'Not so many young families these days, no,' she said, speaking the words as if she'd learned them by heart, learned them for a play. She stared straight at Pete with immutable, incredibly striking navy blue eyes. Pete shifted his weight from one foot to the other, feeling trapped.

'Well, people move out to the towns, I suppose, where there's work,' said. It sounded prosaic, stupid, even, though he could see no fault in the argument.

'Did I mention that I happened to run into Beatrice yesterday?' said Pearl to the counter-woman as if Pete had never spoken. 'You'll never guess what she told me.'

'How was she looking, then?'

'Well, you know how she is. All the same, I could see straight away that she was worse than usual. She said she'd had one of those journalists turn up on her doorstep, after all this time. On a Sunday, too.'

'You'd think they could find something better to do with themselves, wouldn't you? It's not as if they were any use at the time, either.' The counter-woman was absently stacking Peter's purchases into a plastic carrier, though she seemed to have little or no awareness of his continued presence in the shop.

'I don't suppose they'll ever find her, not now,' said Pearl.

'There'd most likely be nothing much to find, not after fifteen years.' The counter-woman twisted the twin handles of Pete's carrier bag into an unnecessary knot. Pete reached forward and grabbed at it, swinging it haphazardly from its place beside the till and reeling it in against the uncomplaining bulk that was his body.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Goodbye.' The bell jangled as the door snapped shut behind him. He stumbled to the car, knowing he was watched.

They had found no corpse, and so there was no murderer. The microfiched copies of local newspapers in the public library had told him how Claire Parkerton, seven years old, blonde hair and hazel eyes, had disappeared on a Thursday night

in early April and never been seen again.

He stared down at the little black and white face, dancing just beyond his reach among the million tiny dots of faded newsprint. The child was lost to time and forgotten now by most, but the girl he saw was human. The soft and questioning eyes had been awash with hopes and doubts and maybe even fears. They penetrated nothing. Pete could see a trace of Rosie in the light of those ingenuous eyes, and Dr Beatrice Parkerton had started dying when she had lost sight of that light.

He pressed the back of his hand against his eyes so as not to see her anymore. His head hurt, and the darkened backs of his eyelids showed him pictures. He saw Rosie, he saw Clara, he saw James, turning right at the school gates, and walking slowly away from him along the empty road.

‘Sometimes they change places,’ said Clara. ‘With people.’

‘Why would they want to do that, if they’re fairies?’ asked Rosie.

‘Because it gives them power,’ said Clara drowsily. The sun was hot and Clara had her eyes closed. Rosie found she couldn’t really tell if her friend was being serious or not. She couldn’t imagine anything more wonderful than magic, nor why anyone would want to give it up. Clara had told her that the fairies could be anything they wanted, if they concentrated on it hard enough. She rolled over on her back, shading her eyes with her hand. The light that streamed through the canopy of strident leaves had become so bright it hurt. To Rosie now the sounds seemed especially intense. It was as if she could hear the voice of every bird and insect, pressing itself against the lining of her ear. In the trees it would be cooler, she thought. If I were a fairy I could fly up there, and spy on everybody on the ground.

‘Can they ever come back?’ she asked suddenly, gazing upwards through the cracks between her fingers.

‘What,’ said Clara, her head buried in her arms. Her voice was muffled, and she sounded sleepy, but Rosie knew she wasn’t really. Clara didn’t like to fall asleep under the sun.

‘The people who’ve changed places with the fairies. If they wanted to, I mean.’

Clara raised her head a little, then turned over on her side. Her whitish, yellow hair lay across the grass in great long runners. To Rosie it looked as if it might want to crawl away by itself, like a dozen shiny caterpillars.

‘It’s a very difficult thing,’ said the girl. ‘But if they try with all their hearts, and if they really, really want to, then I think it can be done.’

Now, when he took Clara home, it was usually broad daylight. They were coming to the hottest part of the year, and the square blue house looked sucked of all substance, flimsy as cardboard under the colourless evening sky. There was no need, in the white, bright evening, for any bulb to be left burning in the porch.

‘I can go home on my own now, Mr Apperley,’ she said to him. ‘It’s very

light, and very safe.'

'Well, only if you're sure of that, my love,' said Lizzie. 'Just make sure you tell us, won't you, if you change your mind.'

It was Peter Clara smiled at, a close, hard smile that he could not penetrate. Oh, Rosie, his voice flickered upwards like a candle in his mind. Elisabeth reached past him and put both her hands upon the fallow mass of Clara's yellow hair.

'Take a piece of shortbread with you, then,' she said. 'It should be cool enough by now.'

He carried Rosie up the stairs. The pink pyjamas she had on were out of tune with the orange fire that made her hair, and he wondered vaguely how Liz had come to choose the colour. She was heavy in his arms, and getting heavier with sleep. 'Read me a story from my fairy book, Daddy,' she said, as he laid her on her bed, and he was glad, because he still had that. He picked up the book she seemed to want and opened it at random. A reddish-orange leaf fell out, a garden thing that had got in there somehow and died. He turned the pages, thinking that he did not like the pictures much. They're nothing more than bluebottles, he thought. Sticky, filmy wings and nasty, painted faces. I wonder why the children love them so.

'The Changeling,' he began suddenly, starting to read from the top of the page in front of him. 'Or, The Boy Who Played with Fairies.' Rosie sighed deeply as if contented. Her eyes were closed and he wondered how much of it she was going to hear. The picture opposite the outsize text showed a little boy dressed all in green, sitting in the middle of a sunny woodland clearing. He looked as if he might be waiting for something, and maybe something bad. The words Pete read did not form a story exactly, but perhaps to Rosie that was what they were. He went on with it, telling her about how the fairies would sometimes replace a human baby in its cradle with a child that was one of their own. 'A fairy child in human space is often an angry and resentful thing,' he read. 'And the human mite will never know itself in Fairyland.' As he continued to read, Pete found that he was sweating and feeling slightly nauseous. It was beyond him, how his sister could have found this book for Rosie, or indeed for any child.

'Doesn't it frighten you?' he asked her softly, but she shook her head, sliding it back and forth emphatically over the crisply striped material of the pillowcase. Her lashes flickered up and down before coming to rest again upon her flower-pink cheeks. He knew that she could hear him, though she had wandered close to sleep.

'Are you still awake?' he said, not willing yet to let her go. She nodded, opening her eyes and looking right up into his. How like that little boy she is, he thought, that boy in his woodland clearing. Sitting still and waiting for his life to come and get him. How like me.

'I want to hear the bit about Bertram's ugly fairy sister,' she said, turning her face back towards the open pages of the book.

'I've never heard about a fairy being ugly,' said Peter, trying to slow the

rhythm of his heart. 'Bad fairies yes, like the one in Sleeping Beauty, but are you sure that there are really ugly fairies?'

'Lelanda was. I think that she was born that way. That's why she wanted to bring them back a little boy. To show everyone how clever she could be, instead.' Rosie paused, as if she had forgotten something. 'Only I don't think that she was really ugly. She only thought she was, that's all.'

The picture on the next page showed a tiny, dun-haired little thing, sheltering from something in the curled-up tendrils of a fern. Pete could see at once that if she'd been a girl and not a fairy, she would have been the one that always sat right towards the back at school, the kind that walked with no-one, and was jealous of her pride.

'It looks as if you know everything about her already,' he said. He could not stop himself from reading on, however, from reading in his head to where the boy was stolen, and exchanged. 'They knew it wasn't Bertram, even though it looked just like him,' said the specks of black and white, laughing at him as they flew. He closed the book up tight, with a snap that made him jump. 'That's all there is for now,' he said. 'Perhaps we'll try another one tomorrow.'

When he looked down at the bed, he could see the girl was sleeping. Her hair seemed to be a cradle for her head, a cup that shone the firebrand colours of Autumn. Pete got up, smoothed the quilt, and left the room. He found he did not feel like putting out the light.

He knew that it was now. Pete lay suddenly awake, staring at the square patch on the ceiling where the slightly parted curtains had let the moon get in. It danced there, bringing itself alive in a shifting pattern of waves and tangled shadows. Liz slept on, her back curled pale and tight away from him.

'I can't see what you're worried about,' she had said as they prepared that night for bed. 'They're only in the garden. You can see them from the window.' She had sounded irritated with him, as perhaps she often did, these days.

'You read these things,' he said, and then broke off. The affair had already been decided, after all.

'There's no way of getting in, except from round the front.' She tugged her bristle brush abruptly downwards through her hair. 'You know full well we back right onto the Shobrooks.' She had turned towards him, stared him in the face. 'The only thing that is remotely worrying about our garden is that it always seems to be alive with spiders.'

As Peter lifted aside his portion of the bedcovers and stepped out onto the rug he wondered what James might have been able to tell them about their spiders. They were probably gathering to breed, or had just hatched out, or something. James would have known. It struck him then that James would have adored their garden, would have loved it just as Rosie loved it. He made his way carefully down the stairs, thinking about how it might have been had James grown up and then come out to visit them. He found that it was impossible to imagine James without his brown leather bag full of pillboxes and notebooks. Would he have

brought anyone with him, a boyfriend or a woman-friend, a wife? There surely would not have been anyone as dangerous as Claire or Clara Parkerton. But then again there was really no way of knowing that. People could do the most terrible things, and did do them, all the time.

The moon he found outside was brighter than the one inside the curtains. At the far end of the garden the willows loomed, their empty shadows groping blindly for the toes on his bare feet. I don't have time, he thought, not knowing what he meant. She's probably already gone.

But when he bent beneath the bushes and unlatched the small green door that he himself had made, he could see at once the curling tendrils of her hair, pushed up against the close-knit boards behind her sleeping head. The moonlight had leached it of its red and made it grey, but that was all. Not white, not long, and anything but straight.

The child stirred softly in her rest and then awoke. 'Daddy,' she said. 'What are you doing?'

'Missing you,' he said, and held her close. Her eyes looked wonderingly and sleepily straight into his, and then at last she smiled. Pete told himself it was the moonlight, nothing more, that made them seem hazel when they should have been blue. When he turned towards the other bunk, the farther bunk, he saw that there was nothing there to see.

'Where's Clara?' he said, his lips close against the girl's soft hair.

'Gone home,' the child said, then giggled. 'I think she might be frightened in the dark.'

Pete touched a finger to her skin, to the freckled knuckle of her round and rosy hand, and found it cool. Not cold, but then again, not warm. It made most sense to take her back inside.

The other girl they never saw again. After a time, Pete found that he had forgotten her entirely.

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Maleficarum

John Llewellyn Probert

After they released him from the institution he knew that he would have to visit his old primary school. They had put him through the aversion therapy more times than he could remember, but it hadn't worked. He never thought that it would.

On a warm Sunday afternoon in late May he walked from the hostel where they had arranged accommodation for him to the leafy suburb where he had spent his first few formative years. He walked past the bungalow in which he had lived with his parents and retraced the familiar route to his old school down the narrow streets and out towards the countryside. He had always walked to school alone, navy blue duffel bag over one shoulder, and now he found that, even walking slowly, he was able to cover the distance so much more quickly than he had all those years ago.

As is often the case when one revisits the haunts of one's youth, everything seemed smaller to him. The sprawling gardens of Mr Wyatt were actually a moderately-sized allotment, the huge gates to Mrs Tennent's place were actually easy to see over without jumping, and the ash tree where he and Pamela had shared their first kiss no longer swayed over him like some mythic giant.

Temple Road School consisted of a yellow-brick Victorian building flanked by two collapsed pre-fabricated units put up in the early seventies, all set back from the main road. Behind them lay a football pitch neighbouring green pastures dotted with Friesian cows. In front of the right-hand prefab was a mesh-enclosed netball court which had doubled in times past as the main playground. In 1976 the school had served as a seat of learning for 243 children between the ages of seven and eleven under the sure hand of headmistress Margaret Lyons and her team of nine teachers. Over twenty-five years later and it came as no surprise to him that the building was still lying empty. It was said that it had been closed down because of government cutbacks, but he knew better, as did anyone who could remember what had happened. He stood for a moment in the afternoon sun, looking at the dilapidated buildings. The crumbling surface of the playground was now peppered with spots where groundsel, dandelions and thick clumps of nettles had inexorably forced their way through the rotting tarmac. The dark green school sign nailed to the peeling railings had long been replaced by a white placard proclaiming, in foot-high red capitals, Danger-Property Condemned. He took a deep breath. He would have thought that the whole place would have been demolished by now and the land used for something else, although he couldn't really blame anyone for not wanting to come near it.

Ignoring the sign, he pushed at the iron gate. It refused to open. Looking



down, he saw that it was not locked, but after all these years of disuse the latch had rusted shut. He tried to force it, eventually giving the gates a kick. The metal would not give in to brute force and he had to resort to climbing over the railings, taking care to avoid the iron spikes. He landed with a soft thump on a tarmac path choked with rubbish which led to the main entrance. The ornately carved brass handles had long since been removed but a few flakes of faded yellow paint still adhered to the solid oak double doors. He pushed the fingertips of both hands into the gap between them and pulled. At first his efforts seemed fruitless, but little by little, the left hand door scraped open. A choking smell of dust and fungus met him as he stepped through the doorway. He looked up briefly, making sure he kept well away from any teetering beams or loose pieces of masonry that might topple and prematurely end his visit. Then he made his way down the right-hand corridor, stepping over chunks of mildewed plaster and treading carefully as what remained of the wooden floor tiles wobbled beneath his feet.

He found what he was looking for halfway down. The bright red door, with 'Form 3B' embossed in black capitals on its brass plate, was no longer there. But he didn't need that to remind him that this was his old classroom. When he stepped inside the floorboards creaked ominously.

To his left was the blackboard. They had never taken it as there had been enough evidence at the trial without the need to analyse the now years-old stains which had been spattered across its surface. Opposite the door were three large windows which looked out over the fields beyond. One of them still had a few fragments of dirty glass hanging from the upper part of the frame. Amongst the debris stood an old-fashioned hinged-top desk of the type that he had kept his books in. Somehow it had managed to survive years of being exposed to the elements.

Opposite the blackboard, on the wall to the right of the door, was the painting.

No-one had been able to remove it. They had tried every available type of solvent and paint stripper. All had proved useless. One workman had said that it was as if the picture had been tattooed into the concrete.

So they had tried painting over it. That, too, had failed. No matter how many coats of thick emulsion they had used, the picture had always come back through within a couple of days. When it became apparent that the school was to be closed they had left it, along with everything else.

He tested the desk and was surprised to find that it held his weight. He sat on the lid and stared at the picture. It was difficult to make out details as much of what was on the wall had become obscured by a thick, leathery, mustard-coloured fungus which sprouted from the right hand corner of the ceiling.

He could still remember the first time he had had the dream, and how the next day he had told Miss Gawsorth, his teacher, about his idea for the class Spring term project. She had been enthusiastic, proud that one of her pupils had shown such creative initiative. She had even gone so far as to petition the headmistress to allow him and the other children to carry out his plan of

decorating the entire back wall of their classroom. First of all he had drawn out the design on paper and then they had used a special projector to blow up the image onto the wall. Miss Gawsorth had helped him to trace the outline onto the plaster with black marker pen. He was concerned that the other children helping him wouldn't colour it in properly, but he needn't have worried. By then some of them had started to have the same dream, and knew just as well as he did what the picture should finally look like. Maybe if the headmistress hadn't come in to see what they were doing that day everything would have been all right. Miss Gawsorth understood because she had been part of it from the beginning. She had tried to explain to her superior that while the project was indeed unorthodox, her pupils were displaying such enthusiasm in their work, and were co-operating so well, that surely such activity would benefit them, even though, admittedly, she hadn't expected the finished design to appear quite so monstrous in its aspect.

He remembered how the headmistress had quickly become more and more agitated at his form teacher, eventually screaming at her—telling her that she must be mad, that anyone who allowed, indeed encouraged children to participate in the creation of something so hideous had to be insane. Then she had run from the room. But she hadn't got very far.

He turned away from the picture, left the classroom, and made his way down the corridor to the old assembly hall.

The roof was gone and both the stage and the main floor were so covered with detritus and undergrowth that he could only make his way in for a few steps. He paused and looked around him. Those of his classmates unaffected by the dream had run here on that day, begging Mrs Lyons to save them. His friends Pam and Duggie had been there. He could still see them now, cowering behind their headmistress as she frantically and fruitlessly tried to fight off the thing that had come out of the wall.

Of the twelve children who had been involved, seven were never found. After the trial the remaining five, himself included, were taken to different mental institutions with the intention that they should never see each other again or communicate in any way. Somehow news always seemed to filter through and within a year he'd learned that both Tony Neville and Sascha Williams had killed themselves, and that Helen Patterson had to be kept in a total body restraint on a round-the-clock basis. About six months later Chris Tonkin escaped. Or at least they presumed that he did—no-one ever found him.

He put his hands in his pockets and walked back the way he had come. With the same conviction that had brought him here he now knew that he would never have to return. When he left this place today he would leave behind his past, his memories, his identity. A new name and a new history had been created for him as part of the 'Integration into the Community' care package offered by the hospital.

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, he felt the need to take one last look inside the classroom. Glancing at the picture for a final time, he suddenly noticed that something about the picture was different. Not all that filth and crap that was

obscuring most of the design. Something else. Something that he could see on the part of the painting that was still visible. He knelt down and brushed the cobwebs from the image of one huge, hooked, claw. Standing on its convex surface he could see three tiny figures, and when he lay flat on the floor in the dust he could see that the three, tiny perfect reproductions of faces belonged to Tony, Sascha, and Helen. He was sure that at the time, none of them had painted themselves into the picture.

He went over to the most rotten-looking piece of furniture and broke off a thick sliver of wood. Using it paddle-fashion he scraped off great moist gobbets of fungus which fell to the ground with a squelch, emitting clouds of dull yellow spores in the process. He used his handkerchief to wipe away the thin layer of opaque slime which lay beneath it, and then used the moistened rag to remove the worst of the black grime that had accumulated over much of the rest of the painting.

One by one he found his school friends. Some were balancing on strands of thick, coarse grey hair. Others were playing hide and seek behind the barbed black spines. Still more balanced on the leathery pitted scalp. Eventually he found all eleven of them – eleven children at timeless play, serene gazes all focused upon their obscene father figure.

Just as he began to wonder why he was not among them, he found himself being gathered up in the black fold of a glutinous wing.

‘Because I always knew that you would return.’

The rasping voice in his head comforted him as the world disappeared and he nestled in the secure strength of his saviour.

As he felt himself take to the air, he noticed that the wall held the picture no longer, and before he lost consciousness he heard the heavy rasping whisper once more.

‘My son.’

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River Witches

Alessio Zanelli



There beyond the main embankment,
Where silence makes itself heard
And the rook's caw suddenly bursts out
Like a crash of crumbling crystal,
There toward where inert, exhausted
Adda flows to perish into sluggish Po –
Old witches are said to have their home,
So old and crafty that the river-wind
Isn't able to catch sight of them
In the thick of riverside vegetation,
Nor in the adjacent fields of Indian corn.
And they are said to revel in imitating
The far-off shouting of jubilant children,
Rather than disguising themselves
In the bark of the trees and staying
To spy on calm, unaware passers-by.
I never fear walking those places, nor
Mind the rook's trajectory, and yet
I sometimes happen to quicken my pace
Without knowing the reason why.
I don't believe there are witches
In the intertidal country, where
Horses trot and butterflies hover, and
No fisherman has ever seen one.
Still, for sure I know – had he ever
Passed down there – right there
Somewhere. Van Gogh would have set
His easel, because, as he used to say
Of certain scenes, there beyond the
Main embankment, where old witches
Are said to haunt the poplar-woods and
The river-wind rarely dares to blow –
Quite the landscape goes beyond reality.

Rubik's Fruit

Allen Ashley

The Rubik tree stood at the almost exact centre of the forest. As tall as the other species around it and with tensile roots pushing forcefully beneath the soil, the Rubik tree maintained its own vantage within the woods and had lasted longer than anyone – man, bird or beast – could remember. Proficient in foliage, the tree flowered infrequently and its fruit was an even rarer delicacy. Some claimed that the produce was inedible, others that taste – along with nourishment, smell and vision – was merely a matter of perception.

Many creatures had crushed their particular pathways through the sylvan expanse and the majority of these routes passed close to the Rubik tree. During daylight hours, the copse provided a cool respite from the burning heat of day and a variety of animals took fleeting cover from the diurnal rays; at night, the trees and the undergrowth thereabouts resounded with whooping, chittering and rustling as a second population claimed control of the demesne.

On a sun-dappled morning in early summer, a wild boar snuffled his way through the green and brown fecundity of fern leaves, ivy and tubers in a so far moderately successful search for nutritious fungi down among the forest's carpet. Some forty feet above his head, two cock finches conducted a call and response challenge proclaiming ownership of certain feathered females and a particular corridor of the air. Serendipitous to their dispute, a pair of tree-dwelling marsupials chased each other along and across a succession of low branches, causing an unseasonable fall of leaves and twigs which tickled the bristles on the boar's back and nose as they landed. He paused and raised his head for a moment, wary of larger predators who occasionally took a chance against his angry tearing teeth and his temper when in ire. But his sense of smell was keen from months of solitary practice and he sensed no immediate danger from either above or around.

What did excite his nostril hairs, however, was one of several fallen fruits from the lordly Rubik tree. His sharp, almond shaped eyes discerned a beige coloured penumbra nestled in the grass and weeds just a few steps away, looking a little like an over-large, stalk-free mushroom and smelling more appetising than a platter of truffles. He trotted towards the novelty item, took two or three further inquisitive sniffs then chanced a nibble followed by a mouthful. The flesh was firm but spongy and his square jaws made short work of the meal. He felt nourished even though in the tasting the manna had failed to live up to its enticing aroma.

Like walking past a coffee shop at grinding time or a baker's in the early morning when the promise of hot crusty bread sets your stomach juicing in keen anticipation that can only be disappointed by the later consumption.



Now where had that thought sprung from? What was this world of strangeness where nothing at all resembled either the woods or the glade beyond in which a jumble of sticks and dry leaves served as nocturnal shelter?

He felt suddenly unsteady on his short, stubby legs. He was aware of a panther who prowled the edge of the forest and who would gladly expend a little chasing energy on a substantial kill... but sleep was descending like an abrupt, irresistible twilight... turning into pitch darkness, a deep ultramarine brusquely punctured by loud human voices, lengthy branches ablaze and held aloft and a separate fire licking at his perspiring body but one from which he could not escape. Pain. Excruciating sharp spear of agony driven down his throat, through his guts and out of his anus. Spilled liquid reflecting in the half-light. A changed visage that he didn't quite recognise as, but knew could only be, his own. But how? And why the fatter jowls and clearer skin? His head now upon a shiny stone, an apple smacked into his mouth. A sound assailing his ears. Screaming. Squealing. Seeming millions of his brothers and sisters trapped in coppiced enclosures feeling the flint blade of death.

He roused himself, shook along the length of his torso, spat out what remained of the bitter fruit. Foraging had brought him cramps and visions once or twice before and he knew to avoid hemlock and fly agaric. He coughed, snorted, balanced himself on a quartet of trotters and, feeling uncommonly thirsty, detoured back through the woods towards a refreshingly fresh pool some three hundred yards away.

On a still, overly hot afternoon, a lone she-wolf padded through the twigs and leaf mulch at the thin edge of the forest where the land briefly took on a marshy character. During the course of the previous night's hunting, she had become separated from her pack although traces of their distinctive feral smell still tantalised her sharp nostrils. She could recover them when she wished it so...

Hungry in a desultory but naggingly persistent manner, she was on the scavenge as she made her way through the twisting avenues and past the insectile habitats and the skulking grounds of their larger, furred and feathered predators. She was also pregnant with at least two cubs, the result of a moonlit mating with the alpha male a little under three moons ago. She looked forward to their birth, her first offspring, and the impending weight and responsibilities of motherhood had made her slower and more cautious about her own safety and her place in the silver haired community. She had a birthplace in mind for her little ones and this was the furthest distance she had strayed since becoming aware of her thickening girth and the new life she carried within her belly.

To the she-wolf, the Rubik fruit seemed elongated, bone-shaped, a hard inner shell covered in red meat fresh and bloody from an inexplicable but welcome kill. She feasted gratefully, jaws snapping and tongue slaverling over several luscious mouthfuls.

The post-midday perihelion life of the forest presented no currently apparent danger. The twittering, the scuttling and the merest hint of foliage disturbed by

the light breeze barely registered in her consciousness, so much was it a part of the normal background reality. She lay down on a patch of soft grass and undisturbed earth, her pointed snout resting on the upper part of her forelegs, and she allowed her crescent eyes to close and her mind to slip into dreams.

Her cubs grew, multiplied, died – generation upon generation undergoing subtle changes and taking tangential paths towards multi-faceted diversity, becoming ultimately far removed from prehistoric progenitors. An entwined relationship with the curious hairless apes of the southern mountains that developed over time from a balanced symbiosis into clear master and servant pattern. Yet not without love and affection on both sides.

In the midst of her troubling, stomach-churning imaginings came an extraordinary vision of her svelte, replete female body suckling two cubs who became transmogrified into olive-skinned humans. Like all youngsters, the siblings fought; but their childish play took on a serious tone resulting in the death of one heir and the triumphant empire building greatness of the victor. He barked, coughed and grunted in syllables and diphthongs more complex than her canine howls of hunger or pre-coital yelping.

She wished she could understand all his needs and wants but knew instinctively that there came always a time for a mother to withdraw.

The adults in the pack were unsettled by her prolonged absence. The quickening breeze now carried a hint of restlessness. The expectant she-wolf opened her eyes to the urgency of now. A dorsal shiver sent future compromises scurrying back into the den of memory. She rose, yawned, loped back towards the regular hunting grounds.

The descending sun cast lengthy, split shadows among the shrubs and tree trunks as the man gathered food for his tribe encamped about a half mile away in the sheltering hills overlooking the southern expanse of the forest. Already he walked so straight and upright that it seemed a little unnatural to be so bent when gathering seeds, roots and juniper berries at ground level or knee height. Already the skin was clearly visible on the back of his left hand as well as the palm as he raised it through necessity to shield his eyes from the strobing glare. Already there was talk and gesture around the camp fire from the more forceful members of the group regarding mating taboos, death rituals and the appropriate sharing of provisions and spoils.

To the newly steady-footed biped, the Rubik fruit presented as an almost perfect sphere, maybe a little flattened or squashed at top and bottom but otherwise pristine. He stood a long while fascinated by the refracting colours across its surface – more puzzling and more beautiful than the constant play of sunlight through the forest. At length, he approached the fruit slowly, even a little nervously. With his right index finger, he gently prodded at the pod, causing it to shimmer with fluctuations of blue, white, green and brown like a hyperactive chameleon. As he watched, absorbed, he thought he saw hints of the body daubing and figurative cave painting in which the senior members of his tribe indulged upon feast days. It all happened too quickly, however, so that his

enlarging but still under-developed brain failed to make sense of the codes and ciphers chasing each other across the epithelium.

Uncertain whether the object was edible or mere plaything, he at last found the courage to heft it into his stronger hand. The fruit was surprisingly heavy for its size. He cleared a small seating area in the short grass and began a thorough examination.

Up close, he saw slight cracks in the shell. He patiently levered his fingers into these and with much strenuous effort began to prise off a fragment of the outer casing. Maybe the slight intrusion of air into the plant's core had caused a chemical change or perhaps it was simply a reaction to his digital probing but already the fruit was beginning to lose its earlier lustre. What had at first appeared a pleasing treasure with which to return home and curry favour was now proving to be troublesome and recalcitrant. Did he dare chance his teeth against the thick flesh? Would his hardy stomach welcome or rebel?

Even using the flint knife from his waist belt, cutting bite-sized fragments proved to be a tiring struggle. Sweat collected in the hairs circling his wrist and in his bushy eyebrows which overlooked his simian face and prominent jaw. Smoother but harder than a coconut shell, biting it would probably prove to be dental cracking vanity. At last his red tongue licked, mouth salivated... and lips spat repeatedly till dry. The taste was bitter, unpalatable in the extreme. Snake and fly agaric and the grey ashes of yesterday's fire.

Consumed by a sudden fury, he hacked at the outer casing for another hundred heart beats, creating jagged fragments in an uneven pile in front of him, their dullness barely hinting at the marvellous coloration of minutes ago.

He had not the words but he held the inkling of the concepts: medicine, talismanic, forbidden. He began to believe that he had damaged – nay, irreparably broken – an object of shamanic reverence. The gods and the forces would smile less kindly on his tribe unless he could somehow make amends. But all his dexterity and usage of various bodily fluids summarily failed to achieve reconstitution and he was left lord of a scattering of shards and a tough, stone-like, inedible kernel.

He resolved that none must ever know of this and spent several minutes attempting to either hide or destroy the evidence of his unholy crime. Finally, he simply held only the rough, solid core in his callused palm.

In a fit of anger and self-loathing – and demonstrating preternatural Olympian strength – he stood, leaned back and launched the ball up into the stratosphere beyond the communicative clouds and out into the ice-spattered darkness of outer space where it continues to hang in the uncaring void: scarred... mistreated... lifeless.

The Prince and The Crows

MP Ericson

Once upon a time in a faraway land there lived a king. He was a wise and benevolent man who ruled justly, but his people loved him regardless.

The king had three sons, each a fine upstanding young man, and a daughter, fair as the blossom on the cherry trees of his orchard, and a wife, a proud and noble queen, whose glance alone was enough to quell his advisors and let him rule justly in his own way.

Many years the king had reigned, when sorrow came to darken his days. One morning his only daughter was missing from her bed. In her place lay a single black feather.

'What is the meaning of this?' the king asked his wife, trusting her to know. She usually found things out before he did.

The queen picked up the feather and gazed at it for a long time. 'It means,' she said, 'that my mother's prophecy has come true at last.'

The king adjusted his golden crown, as he always did when he was perturbed. Well he remembered the words the sorceress had spoken long ago, when he took her only daughter to be his bride:

'The day shall come when your daughter is taken from you, as you now take mine, and he that steals her away shall be none other than the prince of the crows, whose heart is blacker even than his coat.'

'But,' said the king, 'Bonesig is a girl, not a crow.'

'It matters not,' said the queen, 'to the prince of the crows.'

'Well, it ought to,' argued the king. 'It would matter to me, if I married a bird. Of the feathered variety,' he added hastily, because his wife had Views about such things, and a tongue sharp as the edge of a sword with which to express them.

'I like birds,' said his youngest son wistfully. 'That new one they've got down at the village inn is a sensation.'

'Shut your face,' said the middle son, who was going through a difficult time.

The eldest son said nothing. He knew what was coming next, and he was not looking forward to it.

'My son,' said the king with great solemnity, 'you must go forth to find the prince of the crows, and release your sister from imprisonment.'

'Dad,' said the eldest son, 'I can't. I really can't this time. Not with the baby and all, and little Tom just starting to walk. Debbie's simply worn out trying to look after them both.'

'My son,' said the king, 'it is your duty to find your sister and set her free. Who's Debbie?'

'She's my wife,' said his son coldly. 'Deborah, remember? You sent for her

from the king of the north. You said it was time I got married.'

The king pondered. He did seem to recall there being a rather fetching young woman about the castle at some point, but he seldom paid much attention to young women. His wife had Views about such things, too.

'I may have said that,' he conceded. 'I was probably right. How old are you now, son?'

'Thirty,' said the eldest son. 'You know I am, Dad. You threw a party for me, remember?'

'It was a good party,' said the youngest son. 'That cherry brandy was amazing. I didn't know it was possible to get so drunk.'

'Shut your face,' said the middle son, who had got even more drunk, and did not care to be reminded of it.

'In any event I can't go,' said the eldest son.

'My son,' the king began solemnly.

'Stop calling me that.'

The king hesitated. 'But you are my son,' he said. 'Aren't you?' He turned to his wife, trusting her to know. 'Isn't he?'

'Yes,' said the queen, giving her husband an icy stare.

'I have a name,' said the eldest son. 'It's Cyntaf. Don't ask me why.'

'Your grandfather the king chose your name on the day you were born,' said the queen impressively, thinking it was high time someone brought a note of dignity to the proceedings.

'Well, he has rotten taste,' said the eldest son. 'Had, I mean. In any event I'm not going.'

The king sighed, and turned to his middle son. 'My son,' he said, '*you* must go forth to find the prince of the crows, and release your sister from imprisonment.'

'Not a chance,' said the middle son.

'My son,' said the king, 'it is your duty to find your sister and set her free.'

The middle son muttered something under his breath.

'What was that?' demanded the king.

His son turned away to stare through the open window at the lush green slopes of the orchard outside. 'Not going.'

'Why not?'

'Don't want to.'

'It's 'cause of that tiff he had with Julie,' said the youngest son. 'Isn't it, Jack?'

There was a brief scuffle, from which the middle son emerged victorious.

'Not going,' he announced, a touch more brightly.

The king looked at his sons. 'Someone has to go. I can't leave my daughter in the clutches of the prince of the crows. Wouldn't be right. Wouldn't be proper. Not to mention the fact that I've already promised her to the king of the south. What am I to tell him?'

'I'll go,' said the youngest son, wiping blood from his nose.

The king beamed with fatherly pride. 'My son,' he said, 'I will furnish you with all that you need. You shall have a white horse to ride upon, a shining coat of

armour to wear, a sword of truth and a shield of justice—'

'It's the other way around,' said the queen. 'Really, Thomas.'

'Whatever,' said the king, with benevolent wisdom. 'You shall have them in any case. I am proud of you, son.'

'Thags, Dad,' said the youngest son, accepting a handkerchief from his mother.

'You will succeed in your quest,' said the king. 'As a third son, you're practically guaranteed. You shall vanquish the prince of the crows, and bring your sister back to the safety of my castle.'

'You'd better,' said the eldest son.

'Too right,' said the middle son.

'Shut your face,' said the youngest son, ducking swiftly.

So it came to pass that the young prince set off in search of his sister, the fair princess Bonesig. Many long days he rode, travelling far and wide throughout the land. Many long nights he lay on the hard cold ground, staring up at the night sky, trying not to think about the new barmaid at the Crown & Bucket and the way she had smiled at him when she drew his pint.

From one end of the kingdom to the other he travelled, but no word did he hear of where the prince of the crows might be found.

'This is getting ridiculous,' he told his horse one evening, as the first chill of autumn touched the land. 'I've been everywhere, and asked everyone, and I'm no nearer than when I started. It's sickening.'

The horse gave him a benign look and went on grazing.

'I wonder if Jack and Julie have made up yet,' the young prince continued reflectively, looking up at the glowing sunset sky. 'I hope they have. She's a nice girl, and Jack's all right when he's not in a mood. What do you think?'

The horse ignored him.

'Bonnie could have put up a fight,' grumbled the prince. 'Screamed or something. I mean, one puny feather. Anyone would think she *wanted* to get carried away.'

The horse made no answer.

'Effing birds,' said the prince.

Something flapped past him from the branches of the trees above.

'Do you not like birds?' asked a gentle voice.

The prince made a shorter and more explicit remark. 'Who are you?' he asked, gazing in wonder at the girl who stood before him. 'Fair maiden,' he added, remembering his manners.

The girl smiled. Tall she was and pale, wrapped in a cloak of midnight black, and her long dark hair shimmered where the gold of sunset caught it.

'I am the crow princess.'

The young prince stared.

'Who might you be?' the girl added, still smiling at him.

The young prince scrambled to his feet. 'Me? I'm nobody – no-one important, I mean – look, I have to ask you a question. Do you have a brother?'

The girl laughed. 'Yes,' she said.

'Is he the prince of the crows?'

'Yes, of course he is.'

'Can you take me to see him?'

The princess regarded him steadily. 'Do you use this line on every girl you meet?'

'No,' said the prince, cursing girls and birds alike. 'I need to talk to your brother. He – um – borrowed something that belongs to me.'

'I will take you to see him,' said the girl, 'if you tell me the name of his wife.'

The prince groaned, startling the horse. 'Would that be Bonesig, by any chance?'

'You do know!' exclaimed the girl. 'Are you her brother?'

'Yes,' said the young prince, looking around for his shield.

'You're too young to be Cyntaf,' observed the princess, slowly twirling a strand of dark hair around her finger. 'And you're too polite to be Jack. So you must be Ennaint.'

'Go on,' said the young prince grimly. 'Rub it in, why don't you? Ah, here it is.' He fitted the shield of truth to his arm, wincing a little at the weight. 'Now take me to your brother.'

'Are you married?'

'No.'

'Engaged?'

'No.'

'Do you have a girlfriend, then?'

'No,' said the young prince, suppressing the thought of the barmaid. 'Take me to your brother.'

'He is here.'

There was a swishing sound, like that of the breeze stirring the leaves of the trees, and a young man stood before them. Tall he was and pale, wrapped in a cloak of midnight black, with a red scarf around his neck.

'Well done, sister,' he said. 'Now return to feathered form.'

'No,' said the crow princess.

'Do as I bid thee.'

'Won't.'

The two princes exchanged a look.

'Let's talk things over,' Ennaint said. 'Man to man.'

'We can try,' said the prince of crows uneasily, glancing up at the branches above him. 'Just keep it quiet. I'm not supposed to talk.'

'Why not?' Ennaint asked, lowering his voice.

'Come,' said the prince of crows, beckoning him to follow.

They walked a little distance away from the trees, leaving the crow princess chattering to the horse.

'Your sister,' said the crow prince quietly, 'is a wonderful girl, but she's a little – well – bossy. I keep telling her crow-men always sound like this, but she's

convinced I've got a chest infection. Anyway. You're here to take her back, right?

'That was the idea,' Ennaint said. 'Of course, now that you've – that she's—'

'I know.' His opposite number had the grace to look embarrassed. 'Sorry about that. I got carried away. It seemed like a good idea at the time.'

Ennaint nodded understanding. 'The trouble is, she was promised to the king of the south.'

'You could send him someone else,' suggested the crow prince hopefully. 'A different girl.'

'She's the only one we've got.'

'What about a cousin or something?'

'I don't think he'd like that.'

'No,' sighed the crow prince. 'I don't suppose he would.'

They were silent for a while, looking at each other, while the evening breeze whispered in the trees of the nearby copse.

'You know,' said the crow prince, 'if you were to take my sister back with you in Bonnie's place, that might solve the problem.'

'We're not birds,' Ennaint objected.

'How's the king of the south to know that? Do you socialise much?'

'No.'

The crow prince put his head on one side, irritably shifting the scarf away from his ear, and considered.

'Your mother is the daughter of a sorceress, right? So Rakarren could just pretend she inherited some magic from her, such as being able to turn into a bird at will.'

'Who?'

'My sister,' said the crow prince coldly. 'Her name is Rakarren.'

'A delightful name,' said Ennaint, who had learned princely courtesy over his mother's knee. 'Unusual.'

'My name is Akrak.'

'That's also...unusual.'

The crow prince made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a croak.

'Anyway,' he said. 'To be honest, I'd be glad to get her off my wings. Hands. Her and Bonnie together...'

'They don't get on?'

'See for yourself.'

Ennaint turned. In the gloom of the copse the horse shimmered white, flanked by a pool of darkness and a blaze of gold. There were two girls petting the creature, chattering at each other across its neck.

'They never stop,' Akarak said wearily. 'Not for an instant. You'll be doing me a favour by taking her.'

The young prince hefted his shield thoughtfully, gazing at the tall figure with the flowing raven hair. Any king ought to be happy enough with her, especially one who had been prepared to marry Bonnie.

'If she agrees,' he said. 'Provided that she's – that she hasn't—'

'She's marriageable.' Akrak stumbled a little over the word. 'If you know what I'm saying.'

Ennaint nodded. 'I want to talk to my sister. Hear that she's happy.'

'You can try,' Akrak said, with a meaningful glance at the girls.

'There is one more thing. I heard somewhere that your heart is as black as your coat. Is that true?'

'I don't think so,' said the crow prince, looking surprised. 'I don't remember ever doing anything really terrible. Petty theft maybe, but nothing worse. Who said it?'

'Grandma,' Ennaint admitted frankly. 'The sorceress. Not to me, of course, but that's what I've heard.'

Akrak shook his head. 'Means nothing. I don't know any sorceress... er...esses.'

'It was a long time ago. More than thirty years.'

'That settles it,' said the crow prince. 'I wasn't even hatched then. *Dad* wasn't even hatched then, or if he was, he was only a chick. Although...' His expression grew pensive. 'There is a story in the family that Grandad was a bit of a rogue, and he did have a falling-out with a sorceress once. She didn't like him stripping her cherry trees. He had a thing about cherries, apparently. So does Dad. So do I.' He smiled dreamily. 'There's something about your sister—'

'Don't go there. Bad idea.'

'You're right,' Akrak seemed a little ruffled. 'Very bad idea. But maybe that's where it all came from.'

'She got you mixed up with your grandfather?'

Akrak shrugged. 'I suppose we all look alike to you humans,' he said tolerantly. 'As birds, anyway.'

'You've convinced me,' said the young prince Ennaint. 'Girl for girl. It's a deal.'

'Pleasure doing business with you,' Akrak replied with equal suavity.

The two princes walked back to the copse. The horse raised its head to give them a pleading look.

'Hello,' said the fair princess Bonesig, glancing at her brother. 'What are you doing here?'

'Mum and Dad want to know you're safe.'

'Tell them I'm fine.'

'You might have left a note.'

'I would have done, but I couldn't find a pen.'

'You might have used a f—'

'No,' said the crow prince. 'With an 'N' and an 'O'. No.'

Ennaint abandoned that line of inquiry. 'Dad isn't happy about you not marrying the king of the south.'

'I've never even met the man,' Bonesig protested. 'Why should I want to marry him when I haven't even met him?'

'Could cause problems. Interruptions to trade and suchlike.'

'What's his name?' asked the crow princess, who was making little plaits in the

horse's silvery mane.

Ennaint blinked. 'Whose?'

'Your horse. He's a nice horse. What's his name?'

'I don't know,' said the young prince, feeling disoriented. 'He's never told me. Look, Bonnie, are you sure you want to stay here?'

'I'm going to call him Black,' Rakarren announced.

'He's white,' observed the prince of crows, in a caustic tone.

'Really, Akrak,' said the fair princess Bonesig, doing an excellent impersonation of her mother. "'White' is no name for a horse.'

'Sorry, my love.'

'Steady on,' said the young prince Ennaint. 'Does he always talk to you like that?'

'Don't you tease him,' Bonesig warned. 'He's my wonder-man.'

The prince of crows shuffled his feet.

'Whatever,' Ennaint said, emulating his father. 'Are you happy here?'

'Yes.'

'Dad wants me to take you back home.'

'I'm not going.'

'I could make you.'

'No you couldn't.'

The two princes looked at each other. Akarak shrugged.

'What would I go back for?' demanded Bonesig, tucking a tress of golden hair behind her ear and glaring at her brother. 'Dad wants to send me off somewhere to marry someone I've never met and be just as bored as I've always been. No way. Not a chance. I'm not going.'

Ennaint frowned. 'Since when have you been bored?'

'Since always!' snapped his sister. 'It's all right for you boys. You get to do all sorts of interesting things, like riding and fighting and drinking. I don't get to do anything. I wasn't even allowed to have any of that cherry brandy at Cyn's party.'

'Cherries?' said the prince of crows dreamily.

'There I am one evening, sitting on my bed doing my nails. Suddenly there's a swishing sound, and this handsome young man is standing in front of me, saying: 'Fair princess, long have I watched thee in silence from afar, but tonight I must speak of my love for thee.' What do you expect me to do? Scream for help?'

Ennaint stared at Akarak in frank admiration. 'You said all that?'

'It worked,' mumbled the prince of crows.

'Then he said: 'Fair princess – sorry, I don't know your name – ' and I said: 'It's Bonnie, well, it's Bonesig really, but everyone calls me Bonnie except for Dad' and he said: 'I'm not surprised...er...I mean: Fair princess Bonesig, all the glories and the wonders of the world will I show to thee, if thou wilt only come with me and be my bride.'"

Akarak's face began to match his scarf.

'Works, does it?' Ennaint mused.

'I was off in a flash,' said the fair princess Bonesig. 'I don't know about the

glories and wonders, but it's a lot more interesting than being cooped up in a castle. I'm not going back. So there.'

'I'll go,' said the crow princess Rakarren eagerly. 'I don't mind marrying a king and being cooped up in a castle. It sounds a lot more interesting than sitting around in trees waiting for the worms to wake up.'

'Absolutely not,' declared the prince of crows, recovering his backbone and giving her a stern look. 'I forbid it.'

'I'm off, then,' said Rakarren. 'I'll send you an invitation to the wedding. Where is Black's saddle?'

'Pushover,' said her brother quietly.

'You may as well wait until morning,' suggested Bonesig, shivering a little. 'It's almost dark now. Aki, you should stop talking. Your throat is getting worse.'

'Yes, my love,' said the prince of crows. 'Farewell, prince Ennaint. I wish thee clear skies and a following wind, whithersoever thou goest.'

'Ditto,' said the young prince Ennaint. 'Look in at the castle, if you happen to be passing by. I can recommend our cherry brandy.'

'Cherries,' sighed the prince of the crows.

There was a swishing sound, and something flapped away into the night.

'Bye, Raki,' said the fair princess Bonesig. 'You'll come and see me sometimes, won't you?'

'Of course I will,' said the crow princess Rakarren. 'As long as you come and see me, too.'

'Of course I will. Take care of yourself.'

'You too. Bye, Bonnie.'

'Bye, Raki.'

'Hello?' said the young prince Ennaint.

'Bye,' said his sister indifferently.

There was a swishing sound, and something else flapped away into the night.

'Effing birds,' said the prince, extricating himself from the shield of truth.

'Saving your presence, naturally.'

'What?' said Rakarren, who was petting the horse.

Prince Ennaint took a deep breath. 'I'm going to sleep.'

He threw his shield onto the ground and lay down beside it, and watched the stars that were slowly emerging in the night sky.

'So am I,' said the crow princess, abandoning the horse and lying down next to him. 'I've never slept in human form before. This is ever so exciting.' She huddled closer. 'Cold, though.'

'I know,' said Ennaint, shifting a little and trying to think about the barmaid. For some reason, he could not remember what she looked like.

'The ground is awfully hard.'

'I know. That's my cloak, by the way.'

'I know,' said the princess. 'It's lovely and warm. Were you wearing it?'

'Yes.'

'That's nice. Goodnight.'



Prince Ennaint lay staring into the darkness for a while. The king of the south wanted a wife, he reflected. Dad would have to send someone.

On the other hand, did it have to be a princess? Maybe the barmaid could be prevailed upon to go.

Prince Ennaint cleared his throat. 'Raki,' he said. 'I mean, princess Rakarren. Thy beauty is like unto that of the rising sun, and thine eyes are as bright as stars.'

'Shut your face,' said the crow princess Rakarren. 'I'm trying to sleep.'

Prince Ennaint lay staring into the darkness for a while longer. The cold began to bite into his limbs.

'Effing birds,' he said.

'Good news,' said the king to his wife. 'We're exporting ten times as much beer as before to the south kingdom. I understand the new queen has proclaimed that southern beer is not worth drinking. Sensible woman. I wonder where he found her.'

'That is good news,' said the queen absently, cradling the warm shell of her soon-to-be-grandchild in her hands.

'There is one thing I don't understand,' said the king, adjusting his golden crown. 'I'm not a bird, and you're not a bird. How did we end up with a fifty percent crow ratio among our children?'

'It matters not to the prince of the crows,' said the queen. 'I told you, remember?'

'But Rakarren is a princess, not a prince.'

'It matters not to her either. All that is required is a kiss.'

'A kiss?' the king repeated blankly.

'In a manner of speaking,' said the queen. 'Metaphorically. True love's first kiss, one might say.'

'I still don't understand,' said the king, fiddling with his crown. 'I am perplexed.'

The queen put the egg back under its silk cushion, and gazed out through the open window, scanning the blue summer sky for any sign of her son and her daughter-in-law.

'All I know,' she said primly, 'is that according to Rakarren it has something to do with cherries.'

'I like cherries,' said the king wistfully. 'Can't remember the last time I had one.'

'Really, Thomas.'

Through the window drifted the scent of blossoming fruit trees in the royal orchard.

'The birds seem to get them all,' lamented the king.

THE ALIEN ONLINE.NET

The Collectors of Images

David Allkins

It did not perceive time as a human would. Centuries could pass without it feeding. It did not sleep, or reproduce. It waited like a fly trap waits for an insect, knowing that one will come eventually.

The park had died in the seventies. The gates were covered with graffiti; the bright colours slashed over grey. 'Return to the Primeval World' invited the sign over the gates. Nearby would have been a map of the park if the glass hadn't been smashed and the paper removed. A rat scuttled to the safety of under the gates.

'Very inviting,' thought Adrian Dawson. He'd parked his car, put the safety lock on the steering wheel and shut the doors. Tim had told him the place had been shut up for business. Of course that didn't mean that somebody couldn't be in there. Dawson thought that at six feet tall and solidly built (okay, a fair bit of it was fat) he could intimidate any criminals in there even if he was wearing glasses and going bald.

Dawson had the go-ahead from the late owner's son to look around and the freedom of the place for as long as he liked. The car park gravel crunched underneath him as he walked to the doors.

'The Primeval World' had been built on a solid theoretical grounding in 1974. The South West always had tourists in the summer, so build a park for them. And as children had always liked dinosaurs, base the attraction around that.

Put in the token educational interest, stock up the souvenir shop and wait for the money.

Now there was just one visitor, there not to stare at the models because they were dinosaurs, but because they would be forgotten glories. Weather-beaten, aged and decayed. The park that time forgot. He turned the key, unchained the door and went inside. It was a mild day, the sunlight flicking off a dislodged turnstile. He saw an undamaged map of the park. It had four sections, the beginning of life, the Age of Amphibians, the Age of Reptiles (the largest part) and the Age of Mammals.

Dawson had been surprised that Tim Wendhal was such a thorough researcher when he needed to be. He'd told his friend over an evening drink, seven months ago about the project that would get him noticed. *Weird Britain. An album of photographs bringing to light forgotten odd bits of the country.* One day, he'd come up with a better subtitle, but for now it would do. The next day, Tim had gone round in his lunch hour and given him a preliminary list of places, promising to come up with more.

By now, the working method was standard. Wendhal would find the place,

Dawson would get his camera and they'd both go there. Wendhal would provide the text commentary, Dawson the pictures. Then they'd get published and become a success. But Wendhal couldn't come this time. His mother was in hospital for a routine operation.

Dawson took out a Dictaphone, switched it to voice activation and clipped the microphone strand to his collar. 'I'd check the books about this later with Tim. The park may have some name-plates for the things but I can't be sure.'

Ahead of him, was a path between walls shaped to look like rocks with fragments of fake and real plants and moss on them. The path led up to a door, opening up to a rectangle of darkness. Dawson took a picture of this entrance, changed the settings and looked at the picture on the screen on the back of the camera. 'It'll do.' Dawson's camera could retain up to a hundred pictures on its memory card, but this didn't prevent him erasing the picture and taking it again, until he got the version he was happy with. The camera had a built in flash, but he'd need his torch.

A subject had entered its feeding space. It waited for the material to present itself. There would be something in his mind which it could use. Just enough to cease feeding and wait, until the next human came alone. Even if it couldn't feed on the human, the information it gained could still be useful.

The creation of life was covered in a series of corridors where the lights were dead. Dawson's large torch picked out the placards giving details of single cell organisms leading up to insects.

Dawson remembered what he had to go back to on Monday. Five and half days of selling paintings of landscapes and seascapes. No matter the medium, oil, acrylics, watercolours, the subject matter was as conventional as possible. Dawson recently noticed that his memory kept replaying the views of the gallery's owner, Martin Oakley, on art. 'If most of the public likes it, what does it matter?' The methods and length conveying this philosophy would vary, but it eventually pared down to that question. Dawson believed that art (and that included photography and photomontage) should be about something other than aesthetics. On the day that he could support himself through his work he would finally tell that to Oakley.

At a bend the corridor had display cases of fossil and model fish. 'Backboned animals seemed to go through a fashion craze for armoured bits and teeth. But I still think the model makers exaggerated for effect. Maybe not that much but they still did.' He welcomed the sound of his voice. Dawson didn't mind silence all that much. But silence in the dark was different. It returned him to waking up in the middle of the night and hearing the silence and wondering if the world would still be there in the morning.

Dawson reminded himself that he was 28 now. He took shots of the corridor, the placards and the display cases. 'By the time the book comes out', Dawson thought, 'I may make enough to finish the payments on the camera and the computer. Suppose I'd better make some comment on this place. Give Tim something to occupy himself. God, I did everything I could after my father died.'

I suppose it was just to stop myself facing up to him being dead. So what is this place like? It's dark, there's corridors, in the middle of nowhere, it's like...'

'A fall-out shelter' he said.

There was something it could use. The search began, crawling into his mind for material to store, manipulate and use. Once it had finished gaining the information, then it could project it to gauge if it could feed off him. If not, it would wait and could use the information later.

Then there was only the sound of Dawson's thoughts. 'The way my father worried about the idea of nuclear war, anybody would think he'd been on the Manhattan Project.' He'd absorbed detail about it by proxy. He'd watched the same programmes and films that his father had taped. He'd read through the same books during his free time. Of course, in his father's case it may have been the idea that he'd lose everything and everybody in a flash of light. At least it was just an old fear like communism. Now people only seemed worried by pollution and terrorism.

He checked the pictures and moved into the light and a new timescale. It was entering the Age of Amphibians section that Dawson saw the main design of the park.

The models had been made to be concerned more with accuracy of appearance than scale. They sat on plinths and fenced off platforms. The areas, they stood in had been reconstructed to incorporate pieces of the landscapes of the time: plants, logs, rocks. On the fences around the models, there were plastic cards giving details of what these creatures were and where and how they lived. But now the models had begun to decay. In places the paint had cracked; toes had broken off, spider webs inside open mouths. There were glimpses of fur as rats hid, hearing the crunch of his feet on the gravel.

Then Dawson realised what was unusual about the park. There were no human signs of desecration. He'd been to some abandoned churches and warehouses before. Looking around he'd found litter, empty bottles, cigarette butts, sometimes syringes and sleeping bags. On finding these he'd left quickly not wanting to be attacked by the owners.

Dawson stretched out the tripod. He looked at the name on the sculpture, Dimetrodon. As he saw it, it was a large lizard with a sail on its back. On the base, it was next to a log, almost the length of its body, with two fern plants under the creature's head. Dawson adjusted the camera view to fit in the whole statue. After taking the shot, he switched the camera to still mode to check the picture. It was of the statue with its nameplate clearly legible.

He carefully made his way around the park capturing the models. One thing that he noticed was that the creatures, not in scale, mouths open to show teeth, digits with large claws, could not have looked realistic even when the park had first opened. Now just they appeared to be roaring and hissing to the wind. A model of a Tyrannosaurus looked less fierce and more tragic despite its open jaws. A tyrant lizard king of a forgotten realm.

The Age of Mammals section had the models in more restrained poses but

they were fewer in number. There was the corridor given to the evolution of man. Five million years in one cement corridor. Then to a choice between the boarded-up building that had been a souvenir shop and the exit.

Dawson made his way back to his car. He had the pictures he wanted and he could download them onto his computer. He glanced at the Dictaphone. The tape was almost at the end of side two.

It hadn't been able to reach him. After going through all the methods it knew, it had failed to create a reaction in him. The subject had been the wrong type. It could wait for another person to arrive. Time was not important.

The traffic delayed his journey back home due to a pile up on the road back. Eventually he pulled into his driveway in the cul-de-sac, then locked the car in the garage and went into his house. As he passed the coat rack in the hall he wondered why he hadn't got a pet, a kitten or a puppy, something that would come up to him wagging its tail.

Before he went upstairs to the room with his computer, he cooked two jacket potatoes, cut them in half and slotted cheese slices into them. Then he ate them, listening to the radio. There was more unrest in the Middle East, city violence and rumours of economic crisis. Dawson wasn't surprised, he sometimes wondered if they made up the news by editing old tapes and changing the names.

After eating Dawson went upstairs to download the photographs. That went as normal and then he deleted them from the camera after copying them. It was when Dawson looked through the pictures on his computer that he noticed the changes.

As the Age of Reptiles started the sky become darker. The thin blue of the sky faded into dark grey. He remembered the light blue sky with the grey clouds as he'd left. He knew the sky couldn't have gone that grey without him noticing.

Then he saw the people in the photographs. The first pictures had groups of people staring at the dinosaurs. They were families out at the weekend in duffel coats and flares, women pushing prams, the odd hippy. They were not transparent or distorted, just people from the 1970's walking around a tourist attraction.

Then under a Stegosaurus facing up to an Allosaurus were three distorted forms. They were men, unshaved with matted hair in dirty clothes, half in and half out of the model. The upper torsos and arms were visible reaching out, pleading to the camera lens. While the faces and the legs fused into the scenery of the plastic base and the legs of the monsters.

This was the point that Dawson ran to the bathroom downstairs and was almost sick. He knelt with his face in the bowl and tried to prevent himself vomiting. He was not going to panic over this. He was not going to collapse into superstition. He was not going to be afraid. When he felt that his stomach had gone back to normal, he walked up the stairs again. Whatever had happened had happened in that park and he was safe at home. From all that he had heard and read with Wendhal weird things happened in areas and didn't follow people

home.

The next pictures of the dinosaurs had them under a sky that was a darker shade of grey. Against some bases and models where the shadows of men but he didn't know why there were there.

Into the Age of Mammals there were people who looked like diseased vagrants trying hide behind or crawl around the models without being seen. The clothes looked more modern, but Dawson couldn't place them. A couple were bald, some seemed to have skin tumours others were pale or had blotchy skin.

Finally, along the corridor given to the ascent of men, the walls had fallen away. The display cases stood in dirty grey earth, with a few strands of dead grass poking through. The models, from apes to men stared into the camera. The final camera picture came out as a grey landscape with a shattered tree.

Dawson ran through the pictures again and again. Steadily clicking past each new impossibility. From what Wendhal had said and showed him, what happened was that someone would take an old-fashioned photograph and then develop them and find either a ghost or a double exposure. But digital cameras couldn't produce double exposures.

So maybe he had photographed some ghosts. Of who exactly?

Maybe the camera had broken, but that didn't explain why things had been appeared in the pictures, that hadn't been there when he photographed them.

What was he going to do with these anyway? Who was going to believe him? Okay Wendhal would but everybody else would just think that he'd created them in Photoshop. He had a bunch of photos that were no real use.

He phoned Wendhal who said he'd come round on Tuesday. Yes, he would like to see the pictures Adrian had taken.

Wendhal arrived at his house trying to look cheerful and asked to see the pictures of the theme park.

'You've got to be taking the piss,' was his only response after Dawson had run through the photos on his computer with a full account of the park and insinuations that these were not fakes.

'I'm not, Tim. Why would I lie about this?'

Wendhal clicked through the photographs again. 'Yeah, if you wanted a fake you'd have just done two or three pictures. You could have faked them ages ago if you'd wanted to. Why do them in a place that was closed down nearly 30 years ago? Everybody would just think you'd knocked them up in Photoshop. And they'd be more like...' He tried to find the word. 'More like the standard idea of a ghost. Not this sort of stuff as well. Not so...'

'Horrible.'

'Yeah.'

The two men watched the photos click round from the entrance to the exit of the park.

'Do you think they are ghosts?' asked Dawson. 'Some them are people from when it first opened. I know the rest look like tramps but when I went round it didn't look as if anybody had camped in this park since it was shut.'

'And what is with the desert anyway?' Wendhal pointed out. 'Why is that appearing there?'

'Can you research this, Tim? I mean you do know more about this sort of stuff than I do.'

'I don't think there is anything else I need to do this month. Can I take a copy of these pictures?'

For the next two weeks Dawson waited for Wendhal to phone him. He wasn't sure if he wanted to find out if the pictures were of some form of devastation from the future. The international tensions had calmed down a few days after he had been to the park. But he still invested in a digital TV system just to watch the rolling news. He'd go to the supermarket and find himself with panicking urges to lay in supplies.

Then finally the phone rang. Wendhal quizzed Dawson for half-an-hour on the state of his mind when he had been walking around the park. Dawson gave as good an account of it as he could, mentioning the memories of his father's viewing.

The weekend after that Wendhal visited Dawson. He brought with him two plastic carrier bags full of books, photocopies and a notebook written in his scrawling handwriting.

First Wendhal went over the research into the area before people had even heard of dinosaurs. They had not been much development of the area before. It was just grass with a few trees. There had been some reports of apparitions, grey shadowy figures, one even of a dragon over the middle ages to the nineteenth century. They all followed a pattern. The witness would be walking over the land then see something approaching them. They would realise what it was and then run off in panic. Then when the park opened, halfway through its second year there had been a tramp found dead in the park. The cause of death was heart failure. That had been the bad publicity that finally caused the park to close down.

Wendhal said, 'Have you heard of the stone tape theory of ghosts? It's that ghosts are just these recordings of events made by the ground or the building or something. When somebody goes into the place, for a reason, the tape plays back the event to them.'

'But that doesn't work with this place. From what you've found out, people who did see something, saw different things.'

'Exactly. It's not a tape, it's a mixing studio.'

'How?'

'Well, somebody goes there and thinks of something that worries them. Then the place picks up on it and tries to project it to them. That's why it appeared on your camera, but you didn't see it.'

Wendhal leant back and stared at Dawson. 'Can you think of a better explanation?'

'But why didn't it do anything when the park was full?'

Wendhal checked the notepad. 'There are two ways to explain it. Firstly the

place only gets switched on when a certain kind of person is there, maybe a psychic; maybe there are some other conditions, solitude possibly. Secondly whatever the force or energy gets from scaring its victims is enough to keep it going for a bit. It's like one of those lizards in the desert that only need to drink every two months.'

'Let's assume that is the explanation.' Dawson's tone carefully stated each word. 'What can we do with the pictures?'

'We keep them, we both get a digital camcorder and then see if we can get footage.'

'Why should we do that?'

'Because this may be our break,' Wendhal cried out. 'This is our chance to be famous. We may have found something that explains every ghost story. We can get evidence that they can't disprove. We can be rich.' He gestured out with his arms. 'If we don't exploit this now, what do we do with the rest of our lives? Struggle with jobs that bore the arse off us, let the world pass us by, end up dying alone in some poxy hospital?'

Wendhal sat back down in the sofa and breathed in. 'Sorry but you can see what I'm getting at Aid.'

Dawson thought about going around the park. 'Nothing actually attacked me. Or those people who saw something. But what about that tramp they found dead?'

'According to the coroner, he'd had a history of drug and booze abuse. He'd been sleeping rough and his liver was nearly gone. He could have died at any time.'

Returning to the park with the camcorder Dawson made himself stop shivering. Whatever had affected his camera had not hurt him. Wendhal did look nervous but not enough to conceal his excitement. They unlocked the doors and went inside.

It knew he had returned with another person. But it had not been able to show any images from his head. But he was afraid. It felt the energy of that fall into itself. Inside their heads the two humans wanted to know what it was and could do. It only knew that it lived and what it had to do to feed. If they knew more about it, the information could be taken from their minds.

Dawson took the camcorder through the park. Through the viewfinder he saw nothing. Wendhal was observing the park talking into a Dictaphone about his theory. Wendhal was trying to be serious about the recording while at the same time falling into excitement about the place.

They walked into the Age of Amphibians then into the Age of Reptiles. The walking felt like miles for Dawson. With every step, he could imagine something leaping out behind. Each old sculpture held a demon behind it. There would be a crunch on the gravel and then something would be behind them. Every time this happened, he kept telling himself that Wendhal was right. If this place was haunted it was still just a mixing studio. Some weird energy version of it but still just a studio. It could only record, playback and ...

The two men stopped still. Wendhal let the Dictaphone fall to the ground and crack. The camcorder hung to Dawson, by its strap around his shoulder. For a second, they felt a white wave arising in their heads, a force going through them. Picking up the memories, their thoughts, and their knowledge. The information, the parts that made their identity, anything not connected to the need to remain alive, being covered by the whiteness and disintegrating inside it. Then the wave passed. And they stood still breathing but not moving or speaking.

It wiped their minds. They had told it what it was and what it could do. That was what it had needed. It knew that it could survive but not how it could progress.

From their memories it learned of what they thought it was. And they thought there were others like it as well. They knew it had the power to create images. And they knew that images could be made into information that could be sent to other places.

Using their knowledge as a starting base, it began to plan. If it could place part of itself into their minds it could do this with other people and use them to find where others were. They would join in its work and use even more humans as material.

Eventually it sent the two men back to begin the process.

The darkness moved down slowly fading out the sculptures in the park. Any observer who had stayed to watch may have thought the expressions on the stone creatures seemed less fierce as the shadows increased over them. As the light moved, the eye ridges of the Tyrannosaur slowly blotted out the eyes. As if it was closing them, as if it had already seen what was coming next.

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ARTWORK BY RICHARD LAMB

Aftermath

Jenny Barber

So I saved the world. Beat the bad guy. Stepped through the portal and came home. Big frigging deal.

Look what it got me. Six frigging weeks in Birch Hall and an off/on state of almost zen blankness. Blue pills, green pills, pretty pretty purple pills and quiet but stern voices talking talking talking at me.

Just because those idiots couldn't fix a destination door to save their lives. Or maybe it was Harve's last great practical joke. Ha bloody ha. Wanker.

If I ever see that scrawny pox ridden piece of shit again, he's deader than Elvis.

They picked me up wandering the High Street, barefoot, raggedy, blood drying on my clothes and skin. Still in that post-portal state that makes for the big laughs when you get to watch someone else go though it.

Weaving between traffic, singing and spinning and shouting and laughing whenever the mood begs it. Drunk or junked. Whatever. High on the residuals of travelling the interstitial line.

They caught me and shuffled me into a cop car. Gave me breath tests, and blood tests, and piss tests. All clear, of course.

Then, later, head tests. Oh so many head tests. Every day a nice lady sat me down, peered at her clipboard and, hello, this is a recording.

'What were you doing in the High Street?'

Walking.

'Why were you covered in blood?'

Because I saved Red 12 from Tom. He didn't go quietly.

'What's Red 12?'

A place I go.

'Where is it?'

No frigging idea.

'Did you kill this Tom?'

Do I look like I know which end's the business end of a knife? Of course I didn't bloody kill the git.

'So where did the blood come from?'

His second head exploded. Kaboom. Kersplatt. You think I got messed up, you should have seen Colin. Bits of brain and bloody yuck all over the place.

'Who's Colin?'

The hero. The one who's supposed to sort the bad shit out. I was just there to bear witness to his great and noble deeds. And push the car when he got it stuck

in mud for the fiftieth time in a day.

A pause. A half hidden sigh. Fiddle with the glasses. Take a sip of water then ever so seriously, 'Miss Malone, do you know the difference between fantasy and reality.'

So many answers, and I got to repeat them all several dozen times.

Define reality.

Of course I know the difference – do I look like I'm 5 years old?

Fantasy's what the politicians preach. Reality's the one with the purple goldfish.

Couple of vowels and 3 consonants, Carol.

There's a difference?

I should have played good girl and paid tribute to the Gods of psych. Yes miss, I've been delusional, miss. It was a hallucination. Wishful thinking. A vision brought on by depression. By drugs. By a vision quest where I starved myself and walked around the town to try meet myself coming the other way. I was hypnotised by a man in the pub. I drank too much. Read too much. Wrote too much. Dreamt too much.

Of course there's no such things as portal travel and other worlds. I know that now, miss. I won't make that mistake again. Honest.

But I've always been stubborn. Especially when I know I'm right.

The problem, I think, was the blood.

If it hadn't have been for the blood, I wouldn't be in this little zombie nest. Apparently my appearance and general behaviour made them think I was a nut case who'd just offed someone. And kicking one of the arresting officers in the balls can't have helped.

I sat in cells for the full 24 hours while they tried to find out who'd been unlucky enough to cross my path.

Naturally I wasn't coherent enough to argue my case. Use my phone call. Hell, I couldn't even remember my name at that point.

It usually takes a few days to get back to normal after one of Harve's transfers. He's not the best there is, but he's the cheapest. Besides, he was on the scene and I wanted out of there as fast as possible.

Next time I'll pay the extra and go business class. Next time I'll shower and grab myself a change of clothes first.

So, state psych was *just* what the doctor ordered. They probably thought it would be a safe place to put me until they could find out what charges to throw at me. Or maybe, once the paperwork was done, they forgot about me. Lost me in the legendary system.

And by the time the transfer effects wore off, I was under the influence of I-don't-know how many drugs.

I don't really care if they start thinking I'm the most delusional freak to be spat out of an identi-kit red brick house. That I can handle. What worries me is that someone might hear a tape, or read some notes and start investigating. I don't remember what I said during the first few days back, I hope like hell I didn't mention Shay or any of the rest. They're too easily traceable.

Maybe I'm paranoid.

Maybe they think I made the whole thing up and will leave it at that.

But what if they don't.

Did I give out names and addresses? Anything they can latch on to.

I don't think so. But I'm not sure.

That's why I've put up with this place for so long.

But I'm tired and bored and I want to go home so I'm going to chance it.

I'm going to call Alex. He should have resurfaced by now.

'But you don't have any next of kin of registered, Miss Malone.'

'I know that. He's a friend. I'd like to be released into his custody. He'll make sure I don't get into trouble.' (Yeah, right. He's the one that introduced me to trouble in the first place. But we won't tell them that. Oh no. Then they might want to give him the tests. Ask him why he's got a house stuffed full of shiny new weapons and schematics and little knick knacks made of un-analysis-able material. They might ask about the house guests he gets and why there's a huge fluorescent blue door shaped stain on the wall of one of his guest bedrooms.)

'What's his number? I'll give him a call.'

'Have to dial it to remember it. Sorry. Won't be a min.'

Eventually they let me call him. But there's a skinny nurse lurking behind me. Ready to eavesdrop on the poor nut job who thinks she's some sort of transdimensional traveller.

I close my eyes and stab the numbers quickly. Attempting to block the view of the dial from the skanky nurse and that oh so well hidden camera wedged in the corner.

It rings. It beeps. The answerphone cuts in. The bastard. He should have been back long since.

This is not Alex Kincaid. Talk and he'll consider calling back.

'Alex, you git, if you're screening pick the damn phone up. Now. It's important.'

I wait a few seconds. Giving him time to wind through the obstacle course on his floor and get to the phone.

I can feel dear nurse's impatience behind me. Almost sense the smugness that rolls off her. We don't get on. I'm a difficult patient – even with the meds. Especially with the meds. And her eyes are too close together.

'Alex, listen very carefully. I'm at Birch Hill care home. Asylum. Nut house

thingy. In Wokingham. The one that tests its sirens every Monday morning. You know the one. I don't have a phone number. Look it up in the Yellow Pages. They need someone to claim custody. Put me up somewhere safe and stable. I told them you had plenty of room.' Nice and calm. I'm not desperate to get out. I'm not begging. No sir and thanks for all the fish.

He's a smart guy is our Alex. Keeps a place all gussied up for public image, the kind of place you could hold sedate dinner parties and nice gatherings with good decent upstanding acquaintances. The kind of place that practically sweats a distinct lack of any character. A settlement present from his ex wife. She decorated it herself. Which totally figures.

Then when no one's looking, he goes and fills his Sonning house with the weird crap and doesn't let strangers in the front gates. Big black wrought iron gates with a posh gold effect curly name on the front and hi-tech video phone on a pillar at the side.

And a polite little sign warning off just about any type of caller who might dare consider knocking. On pain of decapitation.

Hopefully he'll be back from wherever, soon.

I should have called his mobile.

Nah. He hardly ever switches the damn thing on. It's just another social prop to go with the flat and the poncey car and the brick thick coffee table books.

'Answerphone? Oh dear, maybe your friend will call back?' says nurse, all arsenic laced sweetness and light.

I can't resist. 'He's probably off organising a pook rally. He can talk anyone into sponsoring those things.'

A slight raising of an eyebrow, and an extra green pill at bedtime is all the response the bitch deigns to give.

I am sooo gonna get Harve for this.

The head fog creeps up again, ready to merge with the darkness of lights off at 9.

It's supposed to be quiet but everything echoes. Doors closing. Footsteps. The low distant thrum of voices. Occasional laughter. Occasional screams.

Someone from down the hall having another panic attack. Faster footsteps. Then no more screams.

My door opens slightly and light spikes a vicious line across the room. A body shaped shadow hangs on the edge of my vision then the door closes and we're back to business as normal.

Hah. Normal is a changeable creature. A demented shapeshifter from the arse end of the 'burbs – and they're nasty little buggers at the best of times.

Trust me. I'm a loyal shadow. I've seen stuff.

The fog rolls over and morning jumps me after no time at all.

Shower. Pills. Breakfast. Therapy.

This is a recording.

“Miss Malone, do you know the difference between fantasy and reality?”

Define reality.

Sigh. Rustle of papers. Sip of water. Slight frown. Bad girl. “Let’s talk about Colin.”

What’s to tell? He’s an egocentric glory hound who pays well. Me and my palmtop follow him around on whatever his latest quest is and write up an appropriate piece for the Piper’s Fury. He pays me for playing eager little biographer. The Fury pays me by the word with extra for photos.

And I plan for some publisher to pay me very well for the collected adventures of Colin Lee, hero for hire.

I even got Alex to agree to do some art for it.

“Have you ever read anything *not* of the fantastic genre, Miss Malone?” Face setting into resignation.

So I reel of a well balanced reading list. I’m getting so bored of little miss therapist. I might have to break my pride and fake the game to get out of this soul sucking void.

Shakespeare. Chaucer. Austen. Jilly fucking Cooper, even. Chick-lit. Lad-lit. Thrillers. Humour. Crime. Classics. Non-fic. Computer manuals. Educational crap. Half of which are names I’ve seen in the bookshop when I go on one of my credit card killing sprees. Half of which I’ve heard gushed about at one of Alex’s *darling* little soirées. Who’s fashionable this month anyway? I’ve been wandering the fog for too long.

I can’t bring myself to mention the Mills & Boon. I got enough flack when I mentioned I hadn’t had an earthy date in months.

(Apparently one-nighters on Red 12 don’t count. Because that would be fantasising. And do I know the difference between fantasy and reality? Am I sure? Do I want to ask the audience?)

Pills. Lunch. Garden for quiet time. Unless it’s raining then its jigsaws, Take-a-Break, and day-time bloody TV. Chat show. Game show. Gardening show. Flick. Flick. Flick.

People come. People go. Zimmers creak. Loonies moan. I’m not crazy. It’s the rest of them.

I’m perfectly sane thank you very much. I know damn well what’s real and what’s fantasy.

Pills. Dinner. (No pudding – I accidentally-on-purpose tripped up bitch nurse from hell. Twice. Heh.) Injection. Bed early.

Lying in the grey light, listening to a clock somewhere. A cleaner squeaking down the hallway. Rattle of mop in bucket. Clang, slop, sound of running water.

Rain knocking on the window, trying to escape the violent wind that chases it. Pushes it hard against this mortar crumbling building.

Doors bang. Something outside blows away. Sounds like a piece of plastic legging it into the night.

The pipes bubble, chattering to the boiler downstairs. Sending water music around the building.

And I hear voices singing in the wind outside. But they're too far away and here comes the fog again.

In the morning I tongue my meds. Careful. Clever. Cautious.

Crunch them up and leave the powder residue in left over scrambled egg. Moosh it up with some OK sauce.

I'm innocent and a good girl. No need to be suspicious.

This is a recording.

'When did you first visit this place you call Red 12.'

Bored now. Time to change the game.

When I was a child. Spitterellie took me.

'Who's Spitterellie? I don't think you mentioned him before. Or is he a she?'

My friend. He was invisible.

'Invisible?'

Uh huh. He used to get me into trouble all the time. He said it was only fair he showed me something fun in return. Carefully. Slowly. Believe it.

'Do you see him, your friend, now?'

Of course not. He doesn't exist anymore.

'Why not?'

Straight face. Innocence personified. A hedgehog killed him, miss. Went to invisible heaven. (If you're good you may even persuade me that Red 12 is as imaginary as Spitterellie. Finally get through to the stubborn delusional girl.)

That's it, make some notes.

I spent 3 weeks in a poky little cabin with Colin the snore, I can wait out some idiot bint of a therapist. Easy. Grit my teeth and fake it with the best of them

Damn it Alex. Where the hell are you? You're supposed to be my knight in white.

Looks like I'm on my own again.

I keep hearing loops of songs in my heads. Lines and choruses over and over and over. Eurhythmics telling me that sister's are doin' it for themselves. Destiny's Child rattling off the benefits of being an independent woman. I draw the line at Gloria bloody Gaynor though.

Pills. Lunch. Garden. Can't tongue my meds this time. Nursey nurse is keeping an eye on me.

Reminds me of the receptionist in Marty's Home for the World-weary. He didn't trust people not to run off with the furniture either.



Dinner. I tongue the pills, crunch them and mix them into the mashed potato. Zombie walk to bed. As if I didn't notice the double dosage.

Let the grey turn to dark blue. Never pure black. Not when I'm awake. Too much spill off from the security lights outside. From the hall lights peering out from under the door crack.

The inside world speaks softly now. Squeaks and drips and burbles fade into the distance, letting the wind sing out as it dances outside my window.

Out. Out. Out. It sings. It's right. It always is.

And I have a cunning plan.

Sunday comes and drags in its usual way. Zombie-walk. Tongue the pills. Zombie-walk. Play the game. Zombie walk. There *is* no difference between fantasy and reality.

Every Monday morning they test the escape sirens. Everybody knows that. On a quiet day you can hear the screech for 20 miles.

Everybody knows it's a test. Everybody ignores it. Perfect.

Motive. Opportunity.

Take a deep breath and walk. Now. While everyone's busy seeing to the guy pitching a fit. Can't think who told him the aliens were pretending to be orderlies.

He sure has a powerful punch. Took 2 of them out without a second thought.

Breath. Walk. Don't look back. Never look back.

Everything is normal. Everything is perfect.

'And where do you think you're going?'

Damn. Security.

I could chance it, but I've already made a few too many escape attempts. They watch me like I'm a school kid in a jewellery shop.

'Back to the garden?'

'Right answer. I'll walk with you.'

Of course he will. And if he suddenly gets a mild attack of octopus hands when he's playing escort, who's to know. Got to play the game another day.

Stupid bitch of a nurse knows something. I know it. She keeps giving me these funny looks.

And they've added the huge white pills to my junkie cocktail again.

And they sit and make me swallow every one.

And everything feels so far away.

Day blurs into night and back again.

At least I *think* it does. I could be imagining it.

Sometimes it's hard to tell.

Sometimes the routine is comfortable and it's just so easy to play robot.

Then 5, 10 minutes before meds time the fog lifts. Just a little.
Then it's swallow, drink, swallow, drink, swallow, drink. Bed.

Fog rolls in and stays for a time. A long time. I think. I'm never sure.

There're no calendars that I can find. And the clock in the TV room is possessed. I swear.

That or it's operating in its own peculiar time zone.

I'm fairly certain places like these are supposed to have visiting days.

Aren't they?

No one's come here that I can remember. Just loonies and nurses and idiot doctors. And orderlies and therapists and the God squad.

Heh. The God squad. Sensible, reasonable, *fervent*.

Can you believe, every so often they make us sit in a circle and tell us how the Lord can ease our troubled minds.

And they think *I'm* the one living in a fantasy world?

I'm telling you now – they're all mad.

Last night I thought I heard someone calling my name.

It was dark and quiet and I couldn't hear any of the usual night-time noises. Maybe I was dreaming. It seemed so real.

It seemed so familiar.

I want out.

But why should I have to lie to do it? Is it too late to ask for a lawyer?

Have to clear my head.

Think.

They have bars on the windows here. You can't even stare out at the view without it being distorted by what they want you to see.

Behind the trees in the garden is a tall brick wall topped with curled barbed wire. It circles the whole nuthouse. I know. I walked the entire length of it the first time my head was clear enough to think of it.

The only way out is through the front gates. Past the pair of slimy security guards and sneak under the security cameras.

There's cameras watching all the doors, and 3 sharp eyed receptionists watching the front entrance.

Seems a bit on the excessive side to me. How much trouble do they think they're going to get from a bunch of doped up zombies?

So think.

If I was in a movie, how would I escape?

Sneaking on the back of delivery trucks is out. If we get any here, it's in the unsociable hours when the sensible ones are drifting in drug induced dreams.

I need a distraction. Something to get both the security gorillas away from the

gates so I can make a break for it.

I know that once I'm out the gates and I can get away. I *know* it. Deep in my bones.

But it's not just the gate gorillas that need to be looking the other way. There's the people on the other end of the cameras and every other uniformed freak that haunts the building.

I need something major. Something that'll cause some serious chaos.

Oh my. I do believe I know just what'll do it.

I've just got to work out how.

It's a cloudy day. There's a light breeze that pulls the first taste of autumn in with it and the two gorillas on gate duty are huddled in their posts, wishing they were at home. Or at the pub with a pint in their hands and a tart in their arms.

I think I might be able to manage one out of two.

I know someone on Red 12. One of Alex's ex flings. Smart girl, Eva.

We talk. We trawl the bars. We have some fun.

And somewhere along the line, she taught me a few of the tricks of her trade.

First pick your mark and pick him well.

Behind door number one we have a young, fairly nice looking gorilla. I noticed a wedding band last time he left fingerprints in my arm. So not hungry enough I'm guessing. Fairly clean living from what I've seen too.

Shame.

It's going to have to be door number two. Early forties, smokes like the proverbial chimney. Perves up every female patient in the vicinity. Reputation for his spot on octopus impression.

Perfect. Unfortunately.

Next is timing. Timing and the right approach.

Middle of the afternoon and the rain starts up. Continuous drizzle that turns bone cold. Nasty damp weather that can make anyone feel a soul misery. Puts everyone in short tempers.

I mingle with my fellow inmates. Whispering, consoling. Feeding their insecurities with little words and gestures. Adding to their individual psychoses with innocent questions.

Winding them up then letting them go.

Eventually someone makes a break for it. Streaking across the grounds like a pack of demons was after him.

A young girl takes it as her cue to run and heads off in the opposite direction. Orderlies take after them both.

One of the security guards leaves his post to help out. The young one.

Bad move.

Remember the guy with the powerful swing? Turns out he's got this real bad

thing for uniforms and he leaps on the gorilla, drawing blood.

There are orderlies and nurses on hand to pull the two men apart. To sedate the patient, to care for the poor security guard. Take him away and patch him up.

Leaving the perve all alone on gate duty and everyone else busy rounding up patients and calming things down.

Timing.

Now for the approach.

I walk calmly to his post, concentrating hard on seeming harmless. Play the good little patient.

'Where do you think you're going.'

I'm restless. Bored. Lonely. Entertain me. Or maybe I can entertain you. Do you get lonely in this little guard box, Mr gorilla. No wedding band, so no one to scratch your itch. Don't think you're the sort who can pick up anyone without forking over a small fortune in fees.

And here I am – a dazed and confused girl from the loonie bin.

And look, there's no one around. Maybe I need to come in out of the rain just for a moment. Maybe I'll let your hands wander without letting the usual look of loathing settle on my face.

Maybe I'll let you do more.

Pride's a funny thing. Pride is why I won't deny what they call my 'delusions' in therapy, but it's not stopping me from doing what I have to, to get out of here.

I was right. The man, the sweaty, noxious, gorilla was *starved*.

And he didn't notice me palming a few innocent items while he was otherwise engaged.

Chalk master plan, part one, up as a success.

Now for the hard bit.

And this better bloody work otherwise there's going to be a beer gut gorilla giving me his undivided attention from now on.

I wait. I watch.

Then one fine afternoon I sneak into the therapy room and set some files on fire.

Then I hit the fire alarm. In the panic I sneak into the main office and set fires in the filing cabinets and the waste bins and the desk drawers.

I just make it out before a nurse comes by and hustles me outside with the rest of the patients.

And of course, the fire brigade is called. And of course, the gates are left wide open for them. And of course, everyone's watching the fire and those fine handsome fire fighters getting their hoses out and watering the fast spreading

flames.

Everyone, including the guards.

So I edge carefully to the back of the crowd. Edge carefully around the fire engine. Edge ever so quietly towards the gates and out!

Yeah baby!

Run fast, kiddo. Don't let the bastards catch you.

I check left and right and choose my exit route. Move as fast as I can without drawing attention to myself.

When I'm round the corner I pick up my pace.

Sooner or later someone's going to do a head count and notice they're one missing. Sooner or later they'll figure out the gates are wide open.

I want to be long gone by then.

I'm halfway down Rose Street when the car pulls up.

I very nearly turn and run when it stops, then my brain starts working. It's a Merc. A shiny black one with tinted windows. Vanity plate.

I err on the side of caution and step back, ready to disappear if the person winding down the window isn't who I think it is.

Luck is my best friend today.

All it takes is one look at the face smirking at me through the open window and I'm diving into the back seat of the car, sinking happily into the leather upholstery.

'Nice work.' Alex says, gunning the car up to 50 in a residential area. One of these days he's gonna get a ticket, I swear.

We drive in silence for a time, then once we're safely parked in the grounds of his Sonning digs he turns, and with an innocent look asks, 'So, do you want to save the world again?'



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Nightfall – Please Drive Carefully

Paul Melhuish

I've finally realised that my weight is increasing. Well, it was bound to, you see. The injections they gave me. The chemicals they have been putting in our food. They are growth hormones, for God sake! And that can only mean one thing. The man in the black overalls will be coming. Still, it might mean I get one more quick sight of daylight. One last glimpse of the sky as they take me away. I haven't seen the sky for years.

My name is Ian. Ian Huntley. I must still be in my thirties, I don't know. I might have reached forty. It's impossible to tell here. I was thirty three when I came here, that much I do know. I also remember the last day of sanity. The last day before reality folded and I found myself in the grip of this nightmare. The last day before I came to Nightfall.

It began on a Friday evening. I had finished my last class of the week. The kids in my class were listless and bored. Winter seemed to have that effect on them. I was glad when the bell finally rang and they burst out of the class room. Graham came into my class and asked me if I could help out on the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme the next day. I inwardly groaned and made some excuse about having to take Liza out the next day but he insisted. I said I would think about it. When I got home the afternoon turned into the evening and my wife and I just slouched on the sofa in front of the TV. Growing more relaxed watching Friends and drinking a few bottles of Stella we snuggled into each other. I swore when the phone rang and went to answer it. It was Graham. One of the assessors, a sixth former called Mark had dropped out and he really needed me to go along with them on the walking expedition. Cursing under my breath I agreed. Needless to say, Liza was not best pleased to learn I would be leaving her in the house the next day to go and stomp around the Cotswolds with the school nerds. So at seven O'clock in the morning I got up, forsaking my precious lie-in and went to the school to meet Graham and the rest of the rambling brigade. By nine o' clock we had left the city and had entered the village of Nightfall.

The journey was all a blur, even though I drove. There were three boys all going for their bronze award – Chris, Barry and Ed, as well as a very pretty sixth former called Joanne. All I knew about Joanne was that she belonged to the Christian Union at school. She was one of those girls who was beautiful but stuck

up. There was also a rebel called Anwar who had green hair and listened to Slipknot. I let him have a tape on as we drove up the motorway which annoyed Graham. Anwar had just come along for the ride. He was a school reprobate who Graham had taken under his wing. Graham wittered on about the various benefits of a Duke of Edinburgh scheme and would I be interested in becoming a full time volunteer. I assured him I had friends and a social life so didn't really need to. As we entered Nightfall Graham was really beginning to piss me off.

All this happened in November. A dank wet month. The trees around us cast a gloomy shade, their branches obscuring the grey sky's meagre light. Its clouds above were heavy with rain. There was no other traffic on the road. Nothing passed us coming the other way. Then we came upon the sign:

Nightfall
Please Drive Carefully

'So what is this Nightfall place – a village?' I asked.

'Er...no mate...more like, sort of, I suppose a hamlet.' Graham always used ten words in a sentence where one would have done. 'According to the map, there are a couple of farms there. Nothing else.'

'No pub, then.'

'Mate, we are on an expedition with young people. We have to set an example, you know.'

He instructed me to turn left into a mud caked lane. Either side of us the trees grew more oppressive. Graham told me to stop by a rusted, broken sign that might one have said, 'Footpath' but I could only assume. I couldn't wait to stretch my legs. We all got out and the first thing that struck us was this bizarre smell. It smelt like a rotten compost heap all around us. It was drizzling slightly and some one suggested that it might be foliage exposed to damp. To our left dense trees stretched out into darkness. to our right a narrow field sloped down into another large wood. I never did ask Graham why we exactly came here of all places. Graham gave us instructions and a map and compass. He split us up into two groups and gave each a route to follow. He was to lead one group and I was to lead another.

Great, I thought, I've never done this before. Joanne was in my group as well as Ed. I looked Joanne up and down. Her blonde hair spilled over one shoulder tied up into a pony tail. Her face was pale, serene and innocent. I would have to watch myself; I had been disciplined for looking at girls for too long before.

'I hope you lot know what you are doing,' I asked them. They looked sheepishly at one another. The other group consisting of Graham, or Mr Lees to them, Barry, Anwar and Chris set off to the south. We set off to the north. We mooched through the wet woods for hours in our waterproofs, gaiters and hiking boots. By mid-day we were lost.

'Can't you say a prayer for us or some thing?' I said to Joanne. I get sarcastic

when I'm cross.

'There's no need to attack my faith,' she answered. I didn't reply. Every land mark on the map that I thought we would encounter we never got to. Every stream that I thought we would cross never appeared. It was as if the land had changed, was playing a trick on us. Chris began to swear and Joanne told him off for swearing. Considering this was supposed to be an exam they soon gave me, an adult, the map to hold. They had abandoned their responsibilities. We moved on through a dank green wood as a heavy rain fell through the bare branches. We walked and walked. The wood seemed endless. I didn't know this country still possessed such large tracts of forest. Just as I thought I had found a footpath and we followed it disappeared into the mire. And still that smell persisted. The dank, mouldy smell. I stared at the map again and I didn't have a clue where we were. I might as well have been staring at a blank piece of paper. I swore very loudly and threw the plastic covered map into the trees. Sighing in a most patronising manner Joanne ran to fetch it. I apologised for swearing and asserted my role as leader again.

'Look, this is the plan. We just walk. We walk in a straight line until we come to some thing. A house, a shop, anything with people, we ask for directions.'

'What about our D of E?' Joanne complained.

'I want to get home tonight. I'll lie, just say to Mr Lees that we did fine, OK?'

'It's against my faith to lie,' she retorted.

'Then fail! I don't give a shit as long as we get out of this bloody wood.'

So that's what we did. We walked. We walked in a straight line, Ed with the compass, Joanne uselessly clutching the map. After what seemed like days Ed suddenly said, 'Look, a building.'

I couldn't see it at first. Then I made out a shape in black. It had a slanting roof, definitely. As we approached it we noticed its size. It was tiny. The size of a wendy house or a large kennel. Its ancient black wooden boards were beginning to rot. A small door made of gangrenous green panels stood slightly ajar.

'Some kids made it?' Joanne ventured. I shrugged my shoulders. I knelt down and opened the small door. The stench alone made me instantly vomit. My charges looked on in horror. I backed away from the thing still clutching my guts. No of us said anything for ages. We were frozen to the spot in disgust.

Finally Ed piped up: 'Those are animal bones, right?'

Whoever had done this was not right in the head. The walls and ceiling of the little camp were intricately decorated with bones. Bones all wound together with sinew. There were also a few organs, shrivelled and shrunken, and some not so shrivelled and shrunken. It looked like a necromantic altar to some minor deity.

'Some one's coming,' Joanne whispered and instinctively we hid in the trees and watched. My heart began to beat in fear. A shambling figure appeared from out of the woods. He was literally dressed in rags. Rags and some polythene fertiliser sacks. Straggly hair was plastered to his skull and I swear his eyes were

not level. My heart really began to pound when I saw he was carrying a twelve boar shot gun in his arms. When he saw the door was ajar he looked around and yelled some thing like, 'Fooka; a bastid!' It was when he let off two rounds into the sky that we broke cover and ran.

The three of us scrambled in different directions and he didn't know where to point his gun. I caught a glimpse of him loading up the gun again with cartridges from a pouch at his side. As we dashed through the mud and leaves I shouted out for my two charges and they replied. With out warning I came to a tumble-down barbed wire fence. Here the wood ended and I leapt over it into a rectangular field. Joanne and Ed appeared either side of me at different points some yards away. I looked ahead. On either side of the field those pernicious woods extended. However, at the bottom of the field light glimmered in an old farm house. A chimney smoked and the grey forms of barns and out buildings could be seen. I nearly cried with relief. Here was civilisation. A shelter from the mad man persuing us.

'Who the fuck was that?' Ed almost screamed in panic. I had no time to reply. The nutter with the gun was yelling incoherently and wading through the woods towards us.

When we pelted down the hill I turned to look back once we were half way down. The bone collector was standing at the top of the hill. I could see his pale nightmare face and black eyes staring down at us. I faced forwards to our objective; the farm.

We gulped for air in a yard that stank of pig shit and compost. The front door of the farm house was dark and silent. There were lights on with in. Behind us stood a few stalls. We could hear the rustling of animals, possibly pigs, very close. The slanting roof shadowed the rusting stalls as the animals moved around in the straw.

'I'm gonna ring the police. That bloke isn't safe to be out,' I spat straightening up.

'Perhaps they know him,' Ed warned. 'He could be a relative.'

I moved towards the door and rang the bell. It clearly wasn't working. Behind me Joanne was looking into the stalls. She was peering curiously into the gloom. I heard her mutter an exclamation of shock. An *oh my God* or something like it. My fist banged loudly on the door.

'Guys, I think we ought to leave,' she announced.

'What? With that mad man wandering around? And we still don't know where we are.' It was beginning to get dark, the gloom settling in. 'Besides, some one's coming.'

A figure was shuffling towards the door.

'No, I really mean it. We have to leave this farm *now!*'

The door opened and I faced a man twice my size who looked down on me with piggy eyes and a wide face. He was dressed like a farmer. His skin was red and blotchy.

'Hi, my name is Ian Huntley. I'm leading a Duke of Edinburgh award scheme expedition and we appear to have got lost. Could I use your phone?'

The look on his face turned to out rage. Those piggy eyes drilled into my brain. With out warning he grabbed my hair and forced me to the floor by kicking my legs from under me. He continued to kick at my back side in an almost casual manner. Ed had also looked into the stalls and what he saw there actually made him scream.

'Josh! Edward! Them buggers have got out again,' he yelled back into the house. Ed and Joanne fled in two different directions. My powerful captor dragged me over to the stalls. In the gloom I could see the hunched figures of the animals. He dragged me through straw and excrement to a corner of the pen. All the time I tried to reason with him. He wouldn't listen. With dextrous strength he bound my hands and my feet. My terrified struggles were futile so I just screamed. I screamed and screamed to let the terror out. Its funny how the mind works in extreme situations. He noosed my neck with a rope that was fixed to the side of the stall. Mumbling curses, he left me. I saw his large frame walk out of the stall and he disappeared back into the house.

The animals in the pen had gone silent. I looked round to see exactly what they were, forgetting that Ed and Joanne had been so frightened by them. What were they, pigs? Baby calves? Sheep?

The horrible realisation dawned when I twisted my head round to identify the species. Reality failed at that moment. They stared at me dumb. I was struck speechless at what I saw. On all fours and grunting like pigs were three people. Three human beings. Three human beings tied up and acting like animals.

They made no sounds, only grunted. It wasn't the grunts and the snarls that made me realise that they had been born in captivity but the facial expressions, the snorting in the dirt, the incomprehension behind the eyes. What swung it for me was when one of them just voided his bowels without comment or warning. Humans would have at least tried to hide such indiscretions. I had to come to the conclusion: these people were not human. In sheer horror I screamed my lungs out. I thrashed and wailed, taking scant comfort from the expression.

Another farmer, possibly his son, came and gagged me. He warned me not to scream. When he left me they terror began to subside to a low hum of fear. As the hours passed another feeling filled me, the awful fact that I needed a wee. I would have to, like them, just urinate without ceremony or privacy. A sick realisation burst into my skull. I would be one of them if I did this. I would become like my new found stall mates and there was *no way* I was going to end up like them. I was human. I had parents. A past. I had an education, a degree, a career. To do as the snorting, nuzzling things before me was to become one of them. It would be an acknowledgement of my enforced inhumanity.

In the end, of course, I did it. I peed and shat like an animal. At exactly the same time as my waste exited from my body a horrible entity slithered into me. A demon. A realisation that I had just taken the first step to beasthood.

Hope manifests itself in many strange ways. I surmised that Ed and Joanne had got away and raised help. I knew that Graham, Anwar, Chris and Barry would have got back to the van and realised that we were missing. As a teacher, you don't hesitate if kids are missing. He would have got straight on the mobile and called the police. It was only a matter of time before help would arrive.

Of course I wondered who these farmers who kept us here were. There was a father and his two sons. The two sons came in and changed our straw most days. They laughed and kicked us around. They were skinny, pale frightened men in their thirties dressed like they lived in the thirties. They were terrified of their father who some times leaned over the pen and whispered sweet nothings to us.

'You'se lovely boys, ain't you?' he would coo. 'You'se my pretties, eh?'

I could say nothing because of the gag in my mouth. The others would lift their heads up to be stroked. One thing became clear through his visits: the farmer was insane. He actually believed we were animals.

In daylight it could be seen that the others bodies were clamped into metal frames that disallowed them from standing up. A thick piece of rusted metal ran the length of the spinal column and several bent metal lengths ran down the side of each 'animal' creating a steel secondary rib cage. The arms were clamped with supports that didn't allow the elbows to bend, but allowed some movement at the shoulders with a sophisticated hinge. Their arms became legs, unbendable. Their fingers fused into flesh from years of walking on them, became feet.

The creatures legs were allowed to bend as they walked on their knees. A complex set of hinges at the rear of the body ensured that the creatures, the men, couldn't rise. I wondered if the people here on this farm from hell had ever walked. I hoped to god that Graham came back with the police before they tried to get me into one of those body braces. A final thing I noticed was that under the braces they wore, tied around their middle, a second flesh. It looked like pig skin, to identify them as pigs. Perhaps his animals had been wiped out by Foot and Mouth, maybe back in the sixties and he replaced them with humans. A chilling thought.

Hope continued to flow. I conducted in my mind what I would say to the papers once this farm was found and its terrible secret uncovered. My first moments up and walking. My first glimpse of Liza. I selfishly thought about the time I would have off work with the trauma of it all and maybe I could get some money out of the papers for my story. The hope manifested itself in strange ways. I trivialised the event, it kept me sane. It kept me going through the cold nights and the fraught days. Each second that passed brought Graham and the cavalry closer to rescuing me.

Three days had passed. To my horror the two sons turned up with a tangled load of brown metal. I panicked when I realised what it was. They entered the stall and one held me while the other stripped me of my soiled clothes. A pig skin basque was tied round my wait and I was forced to the floor. I struggled the most when he strapped the body brace on to me with terrible ease. The gag remained on. The body brace was painful at first. I moved clumsily around the stall. My

fellow captives looked at me cautiously. It was not long before one of them approached me, nudging me with his nose, accepting me as one of their own. Every day the big farmer would come over to our stall in the morning and coo affectionately at us. The animals responded with grunts and even some vowel and consonants. I was still unable to say anything to him because of the gag. I was surprised at how easily I got used to the body brace. I took the role of animal with good humour, still believing that I would be rescued. When the sons arrived in the morning, mid day and evening to feed us I found that it helped to look up at them with pity. They removed the gag three times a day so that I could put my nuzzle into the trough with the others and greedily munch at the meal they emptied out of hessian sacks for us. I didn't want to know what was in those sacks or what that meal stuff was actually made of. I dread to think. The first time we were fed was an event, I remember. I tried to speak to them. The two sons arrived and one of them split open a sack of meal. The other climbed into the pen and straddled among us. He pulled off my gag and the words spilled out. I can't remember what I said. Something like 'imnotoneofthem, I'm humanfor god sakeplease letmegopleaselet mego,please.....'

'Shut yer noise!' and with that he kicked me for what must have been thirty minutes. In the groin, in the head, in the sides, he knew where it would hurt. Give him credit, it worked. I never spoke again when the gag was off.

Thoughts of Liza, my family, my friends faded from reality to fantasy. Nights passed and days rolled by with nothing to look forward to but feeding times and our morning mucking out. My ability to think began to fade. My brain was seizing up. I was accepting my fate.

I had just found that bashing my head against the side of the pen kept me sane. It hurt but at least the pain was real. At least I could control it. At last I had some thing in control. I actually knocked myself out a couple of times. The others looked at me with the usual curiosity. The final meal of the day came and we ate it greedily as usual. It had got dark by this time and as the farmers son finished off I heard him walk over to the shed by the house. I heard him start the engine of the pick up truck they kept there and headlights briefly illuminated our pen. The engine roared off into the night. Us animals fell onto our sides, curled up against each other in the straw and fell asleep.

We were suddenly woken by his return. The pick up skidded to a halt in the yard and the farmers son fell out of the door. He cursed very loudly and struggled to his feet. We all listened intently. He fell into the side of the pen and stood looking over at us. I could see his body silhouetted against the night sky. He was very drunk.

'Hello piggies!' he slurred and they all recoiled. They must all have seen him in this state before and it frightened them. This was not good. To add to the unease this was the one who had given me a kicking the other day/week/month.

'Daddy is sleeping. Shushhh. He don't know I'm here. An' you lot should be sleeping too, only I feels one coming on. Yes I do, yes I do little piggies. Huh. I

seen the way he talks to you. Soft he is. Fucking soft. And the stupid old bastard don't realise you ain't piggies at all, do he? An' the stupid old bastard don't know me and Josh has bacon when he ain't looking. He don't know what I do to that heffer over in the back field, do he? Lovely heifer she is. Brown hair. She's pregnant, you know,' he began laughing. 'He don't know I've been making beef. Shit. I'll have to sort that one out thought. Get to slaughter before she shows.' He looked drunkenly back to the house. 'But he's got that horse now. That lovely horse. Next time he goes up the Dragon, I'll have her. I'll make her fuckin' trot, I will.' He laughed again then became sullen.

Being a teacher I recognise a certain character type in kids. I recognise it in adults too. Even in a body brace and covered in my own shit I saw that this young man was a product of abuse. I guessed he was in thrall to his insane father. Frightened of him. Stuck on this farm, possibly knowing that this was all wrong but too scared to do anything about it. Strangely he was looking at me.

'Them others was born into it. I wonder what you was though? A plumber? A lorry driver? A wanker?' He sniggered and exploded with laughter. His sense of humour was severely underdeveloped too.

'No. I reckon you was a rich bastard. Any ways. That old heifer's got my bun in its oven but you's can't get like that, can yer. You's can get my old seed up yer and no one knows a thing. So which one of yer will it be tonight?'

I went cold. A kicking was one thing, but buggery?

'Right. Ip-dip-dog-shit-you-is-not-it! That's you out then. Ip-dip-dog-shit-you-is-not-it. An' you. Ip-dip-dog-shit-you-is-not-it. An' you. Right. Ip-dip-dog-shit-you-is-not-it. So that just leaves you then, new pig. It's your turn tonight.' He was pointing at me.

The others fled to one corner, terrified eyes shining in the dark. He leapt onto the pen and grabbed me. I squirmed out of his grip and belted pointlessly round the pen. I was actually squealing like a pig, my brain suddenly hot with terror. I was screaming behind the gag, tears of panic springing to my eyes. The ultimate degradation was about to be forced upon me. He cornered me and managed to pin me down with one hand. With the other he undid his trousers. He grabbed my buttocks and tried to force himself into me. He failed. Cursing he pulled at the body frame. He loosened two bolts and that was it.

I was free.

He pulled the frame from my body and pushed me over the side of the pen. I was standing on my legs. He wanted me bent over so he could do the business. I suddenly turned and pushed him full in the chest. He had his trousers round his ankles and was drunk. When he fell the others went for him. Maybe it was instinctual animal excitement, maybe they were caught up in human inspiration, inspired by my imminent escape, I don't know. They thrashed and trampled on him and he was yelling for help. I might have been a bit clumsy in my movements due to lack of use of limbs but I still ran. I ran into the night. Naked and insane.

In the dark Cotswold night my fear turned to anger. Anger on behalf of the other

'animals', anger because they had tried to turn an educated man into an animal. A couple of times I stood on the edge of the wood and looked down at the farm. A hot rush of rage would fill me and I would begin to descend the hill, my intention to burn their fucking house down with them in it. Sanity would battle with the rage. I would show farmer fuck wit and his degenerate sons what type of animal I could be. Feral and savage. In fear I had lost my mind, in anger it remained lost. Their process had worked.

I didn't think about finding some where else civilised and calling the police. I had gone far beyond normality now. I was determined to kill them. It was the only way to take control of the situation. I had even formulated a plan.

Some where in this wood the lunatic had his house of bones. It was obvious he was one of them. Probably some degenerate second cousin. I needed his gun. I would get it. He was just an inbred wandering lunatic. I was an intelligent scheming animal. He didn't stand a chance. Once I had the gun I would shoot all three of them. I would release the animals. Then maybe I might think about going back to civilisation.

In the moonlight the roofs of the farm glowed faintly. I summoned all the breath in my lungs I could and yelled down at them. A yell that echoed through the valley.

I found the nutter's hideaway easily enough. He was not there so I waited. Sure enough he came back muttering to himself. He actually looked saner than I did. He had clothes on for a start. He bent down to open his bone shack and as he opened the door some thing shot out and hit him in the face. He screamed, backed away and let out a loud 'Fooka: a Bastid!' before letting off two rounds into the air. At that moment a large figure leapt out of the undergrowth and wrestled him to the floor. He was easily over come by his attacker. The man sat on him. I got up from my crouching position and approached the attacker.

'Graham!' he looked up with this mouth agape.

'Ian. Quick, pass me that string.' He indicated to the yellow bailer twine laying a few feet away. I did as he asked and Graham expertly bound his hands together. I coveted the gun, the precious gun.

'We better get away from here. They come here at dawn and give him food. They'll be here soon.' I picked up the gun. As we walked he explained that he had rigged up a catapult of dry earth inside the bone shack to the door. When he opened the door it would shoot him in the face. Graham had been studying his behaviour patterns. When distressed he fired two shots into the air then loaded both barrels with two new cartridges. The trick was to distress him then get him before he reloaded. It had evidently worked a treat.

'They use them as game keepers,' Graham explained.

'Them?'

'Mate, this thing is bigger that you think. There's more than one of them around Nightfall. They guard the woods.'

Graham led me to a small hollow by a bank. The roots of the trees above

gave scant shelter. I also noticed that he was wearing clothes. He said that we had been here for two weeks. Two weeks! He asked me what had happened and I briefly explained. I also told him that I thought he might be coming with an army of police to rescue me at any moment.

'I can't get out, mate. Nightfall covers a large area of land. They patrol the edge. Escape by foot is improbable.'

'What do you mean — they? That nutter's got inbred brothers?' He nodded a confirmation. 'Sod them, Graham. We cut off the head. We go into the farm and blow the big fella away. Then we blow his sons away. Or even better, wait till they come to feed the bone collector and blow them away then.'

'Mate,' he broke this to me as gently as he could. 'It ain't the farmer from the valley who comes to feed our gun man and give him cartridges. It's someone else.'

'Who?'

'I don't know. But I suspect there is more going on here than we first thought.' Even in a dramatic situation Graham managed to sound over-dramatic. After a moment of silence he began to tell me how they got caught. Him and his charges, Barry Chris and Anwar, had come across one of the other game keepers. He had been able to speak and told them to kneel on the floor. He had tied them to separate trees and gone off some where. Graham had managed to escape just as the game keeper was coming back. He had managed to get back to where the van was parked but it had gone. By the time he got back to the place where this second game keeper lived, the kids were gone.

'I heard a vehicle driving away but didn't stay to find out.'

'Well they are on that farm. I heard one of the blokes talking. He said that there are other pens there. They must be in one of them.'

'No, Ian, I looked. I've done a complete reccy of the farm and they are not there.'

It began to rain as dawn reared its ugly head. We sat in shocked silence for a long time.

'We have a gun. I say we shot them. Kill them for this.'

'Mate,' he reasoned, 'that's murder.'

'No one knows they are there. They've been keeping humans as animals for God knows how many years. We kill them, get out and no one will know we've ever been there.'

'We are taking on more we can chew there, I think. This is my plan. They have a vehicle. We use it to get away. Back to the nearest town. Inform the police. We take the gun for insurance. We only use it in the last possible emergency. Sound good?'

I regained my sanity. 'Yes. You are right, Graham. When do we do this?'

'I'm quite happy to do it now.'

All we had to do was to sneak up to the farm and get to the pick up parked in the large shed opposite the stalls. We didn't even need the keys. Graham, who taught

metal work usually, knew how to hot wire an engine. According to him we would be gone before they even realised it. I covered myself with some polythene I had found. I wanted to get out of Nightfall quickly. The primary reason being that I was getting bloody cold.

The farm was deserted. Some where we could hear dogs barking but ignored them. As we were about to approach the pick up the front door of the farm house opened. It was one of the sons, the one who had tried to bugger me the previous night. We would have warned him away with our gun but he was carrying one of his own now, anticipating our return. We ducked behind the shed and watched him. To our dismay he began to muck out the human's sty. We would not be able to get to the pick up with out being seen.

'He usually takes half an hour,' I informed Graham.

'Right. I want to find the others. Reassure them that help is on the way.'

'Good idea,' I agreed, remembering my own time here and the hope I held out.

Behind the large shed lay a mud covered yard. Beyond that a foul smelling building with a green wooden door that was partially open. Instinctively I went over to it. I peered in the door. The room was spacious and cold. White tiles were dulled by the reflection from the dark concrete floor. At the far end of the empty room there spanned a bar. Hanging from the bar were the meat hooks. Hanging from the hooks...

'No way, mate. I don't believe it,' Graham gasped.

'Believe it. They are sick bastards here. Are you sure you don't want to blow their heads off?'

'Can't. Against my conscience, mate. We would be lowering our selves to their level.' Above all else, I wished he would stop calling me mate. 'Over there.' He pointed to another set of stalls, larger and more modern than the 'pig' pens. We left the skinned, gutted human carcasses hanging there.

In this pen there were twenty mock bovines in body braces. All of them wandering around in the straw. Graham was clearly shocked. He hadn't actually seen the humiliating dehumanisation process. He had come here in the dark. We knew they were cows because fixed to their human flesh under the body braces was black and white cow skin. Just As I had worn pig skin to indicate my species so did these poor creatures. Most of them were women. What was most horrible about it all was that they actually mooed like cows. The sick bastard farmer had conditioned them to moo like bovines. From birth perhaps? Or had they strayed into Nightfall like we had and lost their minds?

'Look,' Graham cried. In the corner, trussed up and cow skinned Ed struggled. We ran into the pen scattering the herd.

'Get us out....' Ed whispered with tears of terror in his eyes. 'If I scream, or even talk they beat me.'

'I know, I know. I've been there,' I assured.

'Listen, we are going to get the vehicle. We will be back here with the police in under an hour. By tonight you will be out of here. Can you hold on to that

thought for me?’

Even in our extreme circumstance I winced at Grahams ability to overdramatise.

‘But they took Anwar away...for slaughter...he wouldn’t shut up...’

Taking the boy with us would complicate matters. I didn’t know how to get him out of the body brace for a start. We couldn’t take the risk. We assured them again that we would be back and we exited from the pen and made our way round the far side of the farm house. In the field next to the farm house we could see a small stable. From some where with in the complex of the farm we herd the dogs barking again. They were much closer this time. Even closer came the voice of the farmer.

‘Trot on. Good girl. Trot on.’

I’m surprised my mind hadn’t blown by this time, or maybe I was just getting used to the madness. Joanne was dressed in jodhpurs and a riding coat. On her feet were boots that had hooves for heels. A waist coat of horse hide was pinned around her middle. She was trotting, standing upright. Around her head a halter clung to her skull. In her mouth a bit pulled her lips back as the insane farmer drew on her reigns. She was pulling a small two wheeled carriage. The farmer sat in it like a huge toad brandishing a whip that he would tap her with as she trotted on. To say that the sight was bizarre was an understatement.

They trotted past the house and into the field. He stopped and dismounted in front of the stables.

‘Good girl, there’s a good girl.’ He stroked her hair and patted her head. He undid the bridle and removed the bit from her mouth. The bit that I found most chilling about it was when she neighed and pawed the ground with her hooved foot. He patted her head again and fed her two sugar lumps before leading her into the stable.

Once he had gone we took the risk of going to see her. I expected her to look over the stable wall and burst into tears of relief on seeing us. Maybe beg us to get her out.

I remember the look in her eyes until this day. In that dank, dark straw strewn prison she looked right through us. She didn’t even see us. She didn’t react when we called her name. She just whinnied and pranced. Her head rearing up and down with equine grace but so utterly perverted in its fervour.

‘Her mind’s gone,’ Graham stated.

This girl had once been set to have straight A’s, was president of the Christian Union and had boys falling head over heels in love with her left right and centre. What had they done to her for her to have cracked so quickly? My train of thought was cut short for before we knew it the ‘dogs’ were upon us.

Somehow they had bred or trained people to become lupine freaks. These things wore skins like stone-age men, dog skin, possibly grey hound and snarled and, freakishly, barked. They ran on two legs, used their hands and attacked with out thought or mercy. They could have been brothers, I don’t know, their hair was long and ragged. We barely had time to see them baring their teeth before they

were on us.

Graham plunged to the ground as they both went for him. One bit into his face and the other bit into his neck. The gun rolled out of his hand onto the ground. He screamed and I saw a huge flap of flesh being pulled away from his face. Blood shot out from various snapped veins and the animals gorged deeper into the wounds they had created.

I confess. In my panic I left him. They were both preoccupied with him to even notice me. I could have shot them. I could have rabbit-punched one in the back of the head. But I didn't. I caved in to my cowardice and left poor Graham to be killed. Not before I grabbed the gun first.

In the yard in front of the house the pick up sat. It waited. I slowly walked towards it, my heart pumping, the fact that I was getting away from this place dawning on me for the first time. I didn't see him shoot out of the house. The farmer's face filled my vision as he towered over me, the last obstacle between me and freedom.

'Wa's this then? You'm bloody well come back, ain't yer. I knew yer would. You wants feedin' I bet. Well, you come inside the old pen an' I'll get you some feed. Bleedy Josh, bleedy idiot, he let yer out didn't he?' He put his hand out to stroke me.

'Don't you touch me, you sick bastard!' I glared at him.

His jaw nearly dropped to the floor. He backed away a couple of paces clearly astounded.

'Well, bugger me! Did I hear right? Did you just speak? Well, it's been a long time since I heard a pig talk, so it has. My word, a talking animal.'

What he saw and what was standing in front of him were obviously two different things. He didn't see me holding a gun – he saw an animal.

'I bet you haven't seen a pig shoot a gun either, have you? Let me enlighten you.' With that I raised the twelve bore, flicked off the safety and left him have one in the chest. His front exploded like a blossoming rose. As he fell to the floor wheezing and choking his offspring appeared behind him. It was Josh, the one who had tried to bugger me last night.

'Keys. Now!'

He rummaged in his pocket and threw the keys over to me. They landed on the floor in front of me.

'It weren't me who was mental. It was Pa. He thought you was pigs escaped. I knew what you was. I didn't want to harm you mister.' Even through he protested his innocence I could see that he was going to make a move as soon as I bent down to get the keys so I shot him. He took it in the face. I calmly retrieved the keys and went over to the pick up. It started and I calmly drove away from the farm.

I didn't intend to stop. I was going to drive right back to London. I was going home, to Liza. I was going to ring the police from my house. Ed still had to be rescued and Joanne would need some sort of psychological rehabilitation. But I

was not stopping any where near this place. My paranoid mind would not allow it.

But that idea was soon to be crushed. I drove around obscure lanes for what seemed like hours before coming onto a quiet A road. I nearly cried when I came out on the junction and saw the signs for Oxford. Here was normality. Here was sanity. A couple of motorbikes passed me and I pulled out and put my foot down hard. If I got stopped by the police I would have a job explaining why I was wearing polythene sacks and was covered in dried mud and human faeces. The sun came out as I drove and my mind began to relax. Relax as much as it could. However, this was cut short as the engine began to stall. The petrol gauge was broken because it just waved wildly around so I didn't actually know how much I had. The engine judged and the vehicle slowed down. I turned into the side of the road as it finally died. Shit. I was in the middle of no where. I got out and started walking. A lorry overtook the pick up and roared down the road. The afternoon was silent. Only the occasional hum of passing vehicles interrupted that silence. I stuck out my thumb as they passed but no one was going to stop for a half naked man dressed in plastic.

I passed a sign a few yards up the road. I tuned to look at what it said.

Nightfall

Please Drive Carefully

I was out of Nightfall. I was beyond its perimeters. Thank God. In the distance I could see the silver roofs of farm buildings. I shivered. I didn't want to go to another farm for help. In fact I didn't want to go to another farm again in my life ever.

When I reached the farm I stared down at the buildings for a long time. The buildings belonged to Millets Organic Farm. There was also a farm shop on the premises. I looked down at the short track to the modern gleaming barns. It was just a normal farm. It had a farm shop for God sake that sold cream, vegetables, preserves, fudge and even those nuts you can get covered in yoghurt. This place was safe.

As I walked into the car park I elicited stares from the old couple that had just come out of the shop. Another man with his children hurried them to the car when they saw me. I strode into the shop, went straight to the cash desk and asked the woman there, 'Where is the phone? I need to use the phone.'

She took me through to an office where a burly man in his sixties waited. A computer hummed quietly in the corner and his desk was strewn with papers. His eyes widened in surprise when he looked up and saw me.

'I think you better sit down, chap,' he said. 'What's this, stag night prank gone wrong?' His accent was quite pronounced, an educated accent.

'No. I need to use your phone. You need to contact the police. Something terrible is happening.'

As I told this man, who happened to be Mr Millet, the farm owner, he held

his head in his hands. It was as if he knew what I was talking about. When I had finished telling the story there came a long silence.

'Well, Every one round here knew Jack was mad. We didn't think he was that mad.'

'So you know him?'

'Yes. He doesn't mix well with other people. Keeps himself to himself. My God, I never would have thought it. Never would have conceived. Look, you need to get cleaned up. Follow me. I'll take you to the house then I'll phone the police from there.'

I followed him out of the office and across another court yard. Here we came to a large, new looking metal barn. He swung the door open. I hesitated.

'This is a short cut,' he explained. 'The house is on the other side.' I walked forwards, into the dark gap in the door. He shut it behind me and I heard the lock snap shut.

The snorting of cattle could be heard. I found myself standing on a balcony, the floor of the barn below me.

'Oh my God, *NO!*' I emptied my lungs into the stale, hot air. The animals writhed in tight single pens, their body braces shiny and new. And there were hundreds of them. All hairless. Suspicious, frightened eyes looked in my direction. Several farm hands in masks cleaned out the pens. Two of them were encouraging a couple to mate.

'Jack might have been mad but I am quite sane. You won't get away from here, my friend.' The cattle prod delivered a crippling electric current to my back. I dropped to my knees and was dragged screaming to my pen.

Actually, thinking about it now, that was the last time I did see the sky. Through that open door just before I laid eyes on the herd. It must have been years ago. I knew back then that this was it. Chris and Barry were already here. Soon after Ed was bought here along with Joanne who quickly switched from horse behaviour to, well, cattle behaviour. We were not made up to be like animals here. There was no insane pretence at Millets farm. This place farmed humans. I gleaned this information from the farm hands as they mucked us out and washed us down. The secret trade in human flesh is quite lucrative. When the cattle here don't produce offspring, new flesh is plucked from the streets. People disappear all the time. And like I said, it's a lucrative business. Human flesh is a delicacy among the very rich, the very powerful and the famous. All sorts of people partake. Millionaires, politicians, the Royal Family. So when Liza arrived here I knew that she would be here for ever, like me. A business this lucrative can afford to take risks. Her disappearance would be explained by the authorities, they may have even faked her death. It was not unusual. I imagine they found my clothes when they raided Jack's farm. They probably found my wallet with my address in it. Maybe they told her that they had found me and told her to come here. I don't know seeing as now neither of us can speak.

Before I was brought to my pen they took me to this machine. I was given a

tracheotomy, a hole in the throat. All I can do now is make this squealing noise like all the others. I was led to a narrow single pen and fed three times a day. But it's not all bad. The growth hormones haven't quite made me sterile yet. At given times I am taken to the mating pens and I mate with several different females. I have mated with Liza quite a few times and we have had three children. I heard her squeals from the birthing pens as they were born. When they reach five they are taken away by a man in black overalls. The flesh of the young is particularly tender.

We know when our time is coming; we put on weight. They increase the steroids in our food. Some times inject us with it. It makes our hair and our teeth fall out. I know that the next time the man in the dark overalls comes I will be pointed at. I would like to go with dignity, not scream and buck like the others. I know I won't. I know I will thrash and wail, like an animal as I'm led to the slaughter.

AA INDEPENDENT PRESS GUIDE

The **AA INDEPENDENT PRESS GUIDE** has been put together by Dee Rimbaud, an artist and writer, who has spent several years collating information about literary and genre magazines and presses from around the world for his own reference. To date there are well over 1,000 entries and 200 A4 pages jam packed with information. This information is kept on his computer and is updated whenever new information comes to light. So, if a magazine folds or changes contact details, these changes are noted immediately. This is a significant advantage over small press guide books that are published annually.

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Sarah Zama

Moor threw the shovel out of the pit and arched his back, his fists against his hips. Then he straightened and looked at Abdefatha. The shaman was older and much wearier than he was, panting hard while leaning on the box. Moor thought he could see the old man's arm trembling with the effort of supporting even his inconsiderable weight, so he waited a while before he bent and seized the lower corners of the case. Abdefatha gave him a withering look. He was still panting, albeit more softly. None the less, he took his own shovel which was leaning against the rim of the case, threw it out of the pit, and bent as well.

Moor looked into his face, waiting for a sign. When it came, the two men lifted the burden together, grunting, and let it fall just outside the pit, on the opposite side from the shovels.

Abdefatha remained where he was, leaning against the wall of earth, his arms loose on the fresh-turned rim. He was panting hard again.

Moor clambered out, shook the earth off his clothes, and dragged the heavy case clear by himself, moving it by one end, then the other. Then he came back to Abdefatha and held out his hand.

The shaman raised his head and grasped the hand. He let the younger man drag him out of the pit. Then, without a word, he went to his bag which was lying nearby, sat down and waited for his breath to find its rhythm once again.

Moor left him to it, and took a moment for himself. He scanned the land slowly, his hands on his hips. Dusk was quickly turning into night. This was the moment when the steppe was at its finest. Its undulating land – the knolls and depressions dotted with copses and underbrush – was tinged with blue and violet. It seemed to be turning into a motionless sea, inhabited by shadows that spread and crouched amid the waves of land. There was something magical and timeless in that moment, when the day was over and its problems could be forgotten for a while, but night was yet to come and bring its fears and superstitions. It was the moment of true peace.

In the distance, probably near the mountains where the sun had just gone down, Moor saw the tiny, trembling fires of an encampment. A little further northward, he saw closer flames, another camp. His own.

It looked very close, but distance is deceptive in the steppe. It would take a day of hard, fast march to get there, by men on foot with loaded animals. A march from dawn till dusk with just a few brief stops. He knew it because he had led his people and set the pace himself.

He had meant to go as far as possible, getting men and animals increasingly tired. They had welcomed the last stop with real relief. And while the people were

pitching camp by the light of the setting sun, Moor and Abdefatha had taken two of the strongest horses and come back here.

It wouldn't stay a secret. What he'd come to do would be notorious the next day, he was convinced. His behaviour all that day had been suspicious, and he knew it. Someone must have seen him going off with the shaman. Maybe Abdefatha had told someone. He knew that there were certain things that could not be concealed. But better if the people do not see them.

He turned with a start as he heard Abdefatha coming nearer, holding a thick chisel and a hammer. He knelt beside the long case, and inserted the chisel beneath the edge of the lid, near one of the corners. A hefty blow and, levering, he prised the nails out. He did the same midway along, and round the other sides. Moor saw the old man wrinkle his nose up as he struck the third blow.

With the lid loosened on three sides, the men grasped the long edge, pulled and opened up the case.

A heavy stench of balsam rose to meet them. The smell of decomposition was already mixed with it, a nauseating blend which made Moor's head reel for a moment.

The body lying inside seemed uncorrupted, but that was clearly just its outward look. Moor's lips twisted in a faint smile as he reflected on the irony. Barek had always looked powerful and proud, he was a king but also a warrior, and his word and will had carried a particular power. But he had always been rotten inside – Moor had known that better than anyone else. Except Ghimara, maybe. She had discovered it long after Moor, but much more clearly – and violently.

Barek was dressed in his finest clothes and all his jewels. His weapons were buried with him and the coffin had been lined with his three cloaks. His hands gripped the hilt of the sword on his chest, as if in spasm, and his face – the only visible part of his body – wore a vicious, brutal sneer, the teeth uncovered. His eyes were closed but not completely. His complexion, once tanned, was now grey with a pale strip round the forehead where the diadem of leadership had sat. The diadem that Moor was wearing now.

Now you're revealing your true self, the young man thought with contempt. He felt a lump of hate constrict his throat, but swallowed it. No need of it now. All *that* was useless now.

Moor raised his eyes from the corpse, and glanced at Abdefatha as he heard him moving his tools in the bag.

The shaman did not trust his new king. Moor could read it in the old man's eyes, the same way he could read mistrust in the eyes of all his people.

Barek had never had sons of his own, but had raised him up like a son. Yes, like a son – so Moor was Barek's heir, and that was just. What wasn't just was the way Barek had died. Poisoned. A warrior should not die of poison. A warrior does not poison his opponent in order to take his place, his power, his wife, his wealth. And then, from fear, do *this*.

From fear...

Moor swallowed hard and pressed his lips together.

Yes, fear had been his sin.

Abdefatha straightened and turned toward his king. He still held the hammer in one hand but had two nails in the other. Two nails, each as long as a man's forearm. He approached the coffin, staring at the body inside, but he raised his eyes again as Moor approached.

The young man held his hand out. 'Give them to me,' he said. 'I'll do it myself.' This would have changed nothing and Moor knew it, but he felt a need to do this.

Maybe Abdefatha thought so too, in those few moments of hesitation. Then, without a word, he gave the hammer and the nails to his king.

Moor eyed him levelly while taking them, then turned toward Barek – or what had once been Barek. He knelt beside the coffin and placed the point of one nail on the dead man's forehead. He wavered only a moment, hearing the shaman start the magic chant, then he lifted the hammer and let it come down hard. The frontal bone broke and sank inward, so that the temples bulged and deformed the face. Moor tried not to look at him, tried to focus on the broad head of the nail. The point drove through the fracture, sinking down into the brain as if through butter, and struck against the bone of Barek's neck. The young man landed another blow and the nail broke through the skull and pierced the wood of the coffin. Two more violent blows and the head of the nail was nearly flush with Barek's forehead.

Moor thought he would have liked to strike again and again, destroying Barek's head and all the rest, but things would have not changed for this. Nothing would.

With a conscious effort he placed a second nail on Barek's chest, just over the heart. That one, too, he buried to its head. Then he took two other shorter nails, which Abdefatha handed him, and nailed the dead man's hands and feet with them.

He finally straightened. Now *he* was panting.

'This will be useless,' the shaman's grim voice said as the magical chant ended, and the young man raised his head. 'Barek was a strong man, and his body was as strong as his hate.'

Moor stared at him, saying nothing, getting his breath. Then he said: 'Help me bury him again.'

Ghimara heard the noise of someone there, outside the tent, then saw the shadow move against the light. She raised herself from the bed, propping herself up with an elbow – holding one of the furs to her bare breast. Staring at the shadow which approached her.

The flap of the tent was moved aside, and a man's shape stood in silhouette against the moonlight. He was a warrior dressed in leather and fur, powerfully built and strong-armed. His dark hair covered his shoulders, Although Ghimara could not make out his face, she saw the moonlight shining on the gold ring round

his forehead.

Only a few days ago, another man had stood on that threshold, someone she used to fear utterly. But now she said: 'Moor?' with a note of relief in her voice.

The young man let the edge of the tent fall down and came wearily inside, his shoulders bowed. There weren't many things inside the tent, but everything there was, was precious – the furs on the bed, the embossed brazier in the middle. This stood on bare ground but there were carpets all around it, scattered in disorder, but all thick and with elaborate designs.

Moor knelt beside the brazier, his hands clenched into fists. The dying embers tinged his grim face red.

He said nothing.

Ghimara waited several moments longer, then rose up, wrapping herself in one of the blankets and came to him where he crouched beside the embers.

'I was getting scared,' she whispered, sitting down beside him. 'It's nearly dawn.'

'We finished long ago, but I couldn't come straight back.' Moor was staring at the dying embers, his voice hoarse and low. 'I couldn't stand his smell on me – I could not stand it. So I forced Abdefatha to come with me to the Pool of the Moon, although he didn't want to.'

He wavered for a moment. Clenched his jaw.

'The pool was as black as pitch. The spirits were drifting over it like grey curls of mist, but I dived in all the same. Anything was better than to have his smell on me.'

Ghimara pressed herself against him. She laid her head on his shoulder.

'And you know what I was thinking all the while? That all those spirits were people, once. I wondered what were the sins they had committed, to be trapped between life and death like that, eternally, in darkness.'

Ghimara's shoulders quivered with a sob. 'It's all my fault,' she said, her voice muffled, her face hidden against Moor's shoulder.

The young man turned toward her and put an arm around her shoulders. 'No,' he whispered softly. 'It's my fault.' His face hardened again. 'Only mine.'

The next day he ordered his people to strike camp. This gave rise to protests and to whispers, but Moor gave no attention to them. He demanded a forced march all day long and at night they made camp once more. The young king noted that many of the people built makeshift tents, glancing at one another as they did so.

Moor thought about those glances all night long, and also of other things as he twisted and turned in his bed of fur, trying not to wake Ghimara up. He finally got up, restlessly. Dressing, he took his horse and rode away. He told himself he was simply trying to work his tension off, but when he realised he had returned to the tracks of his caravan, he stopped. He peered into the deepest dark, looking back along the trail. He saw nothing, but this gave him no peace. None the less, he forced himself to turn his horse and ride back to his bed.

The following day he ordered camp struck once again, and once again

demanded a fast march. This gave rise to fewer protests, but more glances were exchanged behind his back. Moor realised but pretended not to see.

At noon Ghimara drew her horse alongside his. 'Are we not stopping?' she asked. 'This is a good place, and the people and their animals are tired.'

'No, we're marching on,' Moor replied abruptly, not turning toward her. He knew, without having to look, that she tensed and wavered then, probably parting her lips as if to say more, but in the end she said nothing. He didn't need to look. He could sense her emotions, just the same way as she didn't need his words to know his heart. They had always known each other. They had always loved each other.

Ghimara stayed with him all day but they said nothing else. Moor felt so awkward that, come evening, he stayed with her just a short time, saying little. Then, as night fell, he wrapped himself in his thickest cloak and wandered restlessly amongst the makeshift tents. Their precariousness was his humiliation. They meant his people knew that he would order them to move again next day. He would resume his flight.

Moor hugged himself inside the mantle. Days were very hot, but nights were icy in the steppe. It was dark. The moon was a thin sickle in a sky scattered with tiny, distant stars. The wind blew languidly and its cold breath seemed to the young man like the caress of all those men and women who had died so long ago with a sin on their hearts.

He drifted aimlessly and finally found himself on the dark path they had come down. But he wasn't walking it tonight. Tomorrow he would keep on going forward.

'The spirits could say nothing good to you, my king.'

Moor whirled, alarmed at the unexpected sound of Abdefatha's hollow voice. The shaman – emaciated, grey and nearly naked – had come from behind him with no sound. Moor could hardly make his shape out of the shadows, as if the shaman was actually one with them. Maybe all shamans were.

'I wasn't listening,' the king replied, a little hesitant. He did not trust the shaman who had also been Barek's shaman, but he could not ignore the fact that they'd performed the rite together. Moor could not have done the thing without him. That odd complicity made him feel angry yet insecure about the old man.

'Of course you were listening.'

Moor remembered that Barek did not trust Abdefatha either.

'They speak of remorse.'

Then again, Barek had never trusted anyone.

'Their voices are louder at night time, aren't they?'

Moor only looked at him and said nothing.

'You cannot escape him, Moor.'

'I'm not escaping him.'

Abdefatha grinned, a half sneer in the shadows. 'Barek was a powerful man. I told you, but you knew it anyway. A man of hate. He will come back and take revenge upon whoever murdered him so shamefully, and we can do nothing to

stop him.'

'I'm not afraid of him.'

'Are you not? You won't strike camp tomorrow, then?'

Moor did not reply. He only glared to the shaman, resentfully.

The old man turned away from him, unfazed, and disappeared in the shadows.

The next day, Moor gave no order.

His people woke up early and were ready to strike camp and leave when the sun was still low on the horizon, but no-one saw the king. He stayed in his tent, together with his queen. He lay amongst the fur, saying nothing, staring at the canvas ceiling of the tent while the dusty light of the sun oozed through it.

Ghimara came and lay at his side. 'Are you afraid?' she asked, leaning her head of chestnut hair against his shoulder.

Moor smiled bitterly: 'I've always been,' he said.

'You're not a coward!' she protested, lifting her head sharply. 'I've seen you fight, even with older, more experienced warriors. I saw you standing up to them ... and Berek too.'

'But I've always thought only of myself. Isn't that the greatest cowardice?'

'Berek would have taken me anyway, whether you'd opposed him or not.'

'But I didn't try to. I hadn't the courage to risk it.' He turned his face to her and they looked at each other. 'I thought my people would consider me as greedy and brutal as him. I was so scared by the idea of being like him that I became worse.'

Ghimara shook her head. 'We all do wrong, Moor, we're just human ...' Her voice tailed off.

Moor sighed. 'Maybe I'm still doing wrong,' he said, then added in a different tone: 'Let Abdefatha come here. I need to speak to him.'

For a moment Ghimara did not move – she did not like the shaman either – but then she stood up and moved away. Moor lay pensively for some moments, then he stood up, went and knelt beside the now dead brazier. He tipped his head backward and looked at the ceiling. Voices and daily sounds were all around him. His people. *His* people?

The dust was dancing in the filtered sunlight. It seemed suspended in eternal motion. Moor wondered whether these were spirits too. Sinless spirits, forever dancing in the light.

Abdefatha came in and Moor dropped his gaze to him. The shaman looked pleased with himself and this irritated the king, but he nodded to the shaman to come and sit in front of him and the brazier.

'I thought about your words,' the young man began.

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'And I believe you're right. I'm not going to escape him. He will always pursue his murderer till his rage is satisfied.'

Abdefatha shook his head, as if in disbelief. 'Why did you kill him that way?'

Had you killed him like a warrior, his soul would have found peace.'

'I don't think so.'

'You were his heir. You were going to have everything. Everything. Was it worth it – for a woman?'

Moor narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. 'Ghimara is not *a* woman, she's *my* woman. We belong to one another. That's what Barek never accepted.'

'Both of you could have had her.' The shaman arched his eyebrows as if to say: *It was that simple!*

Moor got angry. He had to swallow and take a breath, but couldn't keep from speaking in a hiss. 'Do you know what he did to her?'

'No.'

'Nor do I. She doesn't want to tell me. What I do know is that she couldn't bear for me to touch her – even me! – the first nights we were together again.' He breathed in sharply. 'Barek was a pig. He'd been killing men, women, children all his life. He had humiliated warriors a thousand times better than himself. He'd raped, sacked, destroyed, dishonoured anyone and anything. There were many reasons why he should have died, but *this* is what he died for, and I believe he met the end that he deserved.'

Abdefatha's face hardened but he did not reply. Moor closed his eyes and forced himself to stay calm.

'How does he know I was the one?' he finally asked.

'The same way we all know it. Only you, Barek and Ghimara were in the tent and many of us had heard him shouting your name before he fell to the ground. Have you forgotten that?'

'No, I haven't forgotten it,' Moor whispered. 'But I thought the dead don't remember everything.'

Abdefatha grinned. 'That's true, but they always remember their murderer's name and that's what leads them on. He will remember yours.'

Moor said nothing.

The evening breeze was lovely: not the stifling breath of day, nor the cold touch of night, but a tepid, languid caress. It was not dusk yet, but would be soon. The sun was an orange ball of fire, suspended just above the mountain ridge.

Moor had stayed alone in his tent all day, avoiding everyone. Then, as the sun had begun to sink, he had taken his horse for a wander near the camp, alone. He had finally come back to the previous day's trail and now he was standing there, watching the path he had already walked now fading in the shadows of sunset.

He heard the sound of hooves behind him and turned in the saddle. He saw Ghimara coming closer, dressed like a man, riding like a man, her long hair tied up in a braid which fell onto one shoulder. She approached him.

'It's dusk,' she said. 'Don't stay here. The spirits will come soon.'

'They're not going to hurt me,' Moor answered.

Ghimara said nothing for a while, then spoke again: 'Abdefatha says that he

will follow you and find you.' Her face was troubled.

Moor smiled. 'You don't believe that,' he replied, amused.

She did not smile. 'Barek was an evil man, a man of hate.'

'And now he's dead.'

'You performed the rite of nails.'

'One more reason not to worry. He won't rise from his coffin.'

'It's not right that you pay for this.'

'I'm the king, now.'

'But Barek—'

'Ghimara...' Moor touched her arm, caressed her. She was so upset, he had to smile again. 'Barek's dead. He left us his fear, because he'd nothing else to leave us, but he can't hurt us anymore.'

She bit her lip. 'So why have you come here tonight?'

'To say goodbye to him for ever. It's me who has to do it. You go back to our tent, now.'

'And you?'

'I'll be there soon.'

She did not move.

'Go,' Moor urged her softly. Ghimara pulled the reins and turned the horse, still gazing at him, then rode away slowly. Moor stared after her, not moving, until he saw her disappear amongst the distant tents. Only then did he turn his horse onto the track again, and studied it. The path was dark, now. He spurred his horse along it.

Night fell quickly, the air got colder, the spirits began to whisper. Moor retraced his course along the path already travelled, at a gallop, to the copse which he had passed through on the second day of march. There he slowed down to a walk, instinctively or simply out of fear. The night was dark, even gloomier under the trees, but he could still make out the path. The milky light of the moon cast eerie shadows. The breeze moved the branches of the trees. They whispered ominously.

Barek was coming down the path towards him.

He looked as he had always done, with his rich clothes and his shining jewels, the sword at his side, the tanned face and the gold ring round his forehead. But his smile was somehow feral, and his eyes weren't eyes but rotten, lifeless things. Moor saw this as the man advanced, until his horse side-stepped, whinnying with its ears down, and refused to budge in spite of all Moor's urgings.

Barek stopped and laughed maliciously. Moor halted his horse and slapped its neck and heard its heavy breathing. He felt nothing.

It's just a trick, he thought and slid down from the saddle.

'I thought you'd keep on running like a rabbit – till the moment I bit your neck,' Barek laughed.

'That's if your teeth don't fall out all around you.' Barek's laughter was suddenly cut short. 'You're dead, Barek. I'm not afraid of you.'

'I will be dead when a warrior's blade pierces my body. That hasn't

happened yet,' the other snarled.

Moor unsheathed his long sword from the saddle. 'I'm here to satisfy you, then,' he hissed, while thinking: But a dead man can't die twice.

He moved in with his sword on guard, as Barek drew his own.

'I defeated other warriors, the young man thought. I'll beat him too.

Moor hurled himself toward his opponent, letting the fear flow through him and transform itself to rage, so long as neither took control of him. The swords clanged again and again, so violently that sparks scattered everywhere – again, again, again. Moor's horse whinnied and moved away every time the men came close, but kept on turning around, never straying too far from its master.

When Moor drew back in order to catch his breath again, he was soaked in sweat and the air scratched in his throat. He had several cuts on his arms and legs – he could see them even if he didn't feel the pain. He looked furiously at Barek. The other man wasn't sweating, tired or bleeding.

He's not alive!

Moor let the fury surge through him once again, driving fatigue out of his muscles, and sprang forward. The swords clashed, sparks blackened clothes and skin, sweat dripped in his smarting eyes. And suddenly he felt one foot sliding away on the rough path. He bent his body in order to stay balanced, and Barek's blow, aimed at his head, went just above him. Moor swiftly changed direction, thrust in under his opponent's blade and ripped his chest open with the butt of his sword.

Barek went rigid.

Moor whirled and jumped away with a gasp of relief – then swayed, his eyes wide open.

Barek took up his guard again, grinning. His chest was split open but not a spot of blood was to be seen. The torn muscles were sickly grey, the colour of his opened abdomen. Inside the ribs there was only rot and worms. Moor's stomach twisted at the sight, although he could smell nothing.

'You cannot kill me!'

Barek sprang at Moor and the young warrior was so dismayed that he was taken by surprise. He parried the first blow but could not move backward. He blocked the second too, but his balance was lost. He fended off the onslaught, trying to win a little room, but he wasn't quick enough. Barek was on him.

Moor withdrew frantically, thinking: Don't withdraw! If you withdraw, you're lost! He'd been taught this many years ago, but had never known the truth of it till now. He felt his mind becoming dull, distracted by the movement of his legs – backwards, but not swift, not swift enough! His arms moved by blind instinct, parrying his opponent's blows in fear and despair. He felt his rage turn into panic as he realised that he could not *think* anymore. Balance went. Moor realised he had fallen when he found himself in the dust of the path. Only then did his mind focus – on the sword point that was hanging over him.

Barek was lifting it, but suddenly he froze. Moor stared, not knowing why at first, then saw there was another sword sunk deep in Barek's neck, the blade

protruding outward several inches.

A disgusting smell of putrefaction broke over the young man, taking his breath away. Berek's face was now unrecognisable. Grey skin fell away in rags; the eyes were full of worms, the forehead had been fractured in the middle; the head of the nail that Moor had hammered in was buried there. Instinctively Moor dragged himself away on his back. He could think of nothing.

He saw Berek lift a putrefied hand, touch the blade with his palm and force it from his neck. The blade fell to one side in an arc. Berek's head lolled wretchedly, half severed, and when the dead king turned his back to Moor, the young man saw Ghimara there behind him. The woman was holding a sword in one hand, the other at her mouth, her eyes wide open. She withdrew two steps then stopped.

'You!' Berek snarled. Even his voice was rotting.

Ghimara stiffened, her face hardened and a different light shone in her eyes, a light that Moor had only seen once, that night in Berek's tent. The night when Berek died, the night he had been poisoned.

'What's the matter?' Ghimara asked, her voice distorted by hate. 'Are you surprised this plaything from your bed has will and strength? I killed you once, Berek. I can kill you again!'

'You! It cannot be you!'

Berek lifted his sword. Ghimara gripped her own sword in both hands. It was the only way she could lift the weapon, but she would never be quick enough. Moor realised it in a flash and even as he thought: Only a coward stabs his opponent in the back, he was already jumping up, sword in hand. He transfixed Berek with a single thrust.

The dead man stiffened. Ghimara brought her blade down on Berek's neck and cut his head off this time. It fell and rolled on the ground. Moor twisted his own blade in the wound and tore the body open. Berek collapsed like an empty sack.

Ghimara ran to the severed head and split it with another furious blow, spraying grey matter, worms and shards of bone around her. Beside herself, she struck again, again...

Moor ran to her, grasped her shoulders, pulled her back. She squirmed and wept, but then she let him hold her. She leaned her head on his shoulder, let the sword fall, let Moor draw her away. She was sobbing violently, her face bathed in tears. The horses galloped off as Moor helped her to a tree, and they leaned against its sheltering trunk.

'I had to do it myself!' Ghimara sobbed, her voice scratching her throat. 'I had to do it myself!'

Moor nuzzled her neck, and put his arms around her waist.

'No,' he whispered back. 'I had to do it.'

Suds

Brian Maycock

Louis had seen kingdoms rise and fall through the grease-streaked window of his café. He had seen love bloom and wither away. He had seen a man killed, and a baby born, and a dog raised from the dead.

'Bout this point, the stranger who was listening to Louis as he poured them their first coffee would look real scornful and wish the tall old man whose name was painted in a semi-circle of flaking white paint across said window would leave them in peace with their newspaper, or their mobile, or their thoughts.

Louis, who knew from long years of telling his tale what was in the stranger's heart at that moment, would smile and say in his deep voice, 'Trouble was, the dog got struck dead again by the next truck that passed. Some creatures just born unlucky.'

And then he would amble back over behind the counter, one long leg dragging pretty much useless on the floor, the result of the truck bumper that had swept him off his feet one summer's day back in 1976.

Louis had just got settled onto his stool and was rubbing his bad leg to try and ease the perpetual ache in its bones when the little bell above the door sounded and a familiar face walked in.

In Louis' opinion, Michael looked a hundred and twelve years old today. He was moving slow, with his head drooping forward and his shoulders slumped. His skin was wrinkled and stretched tight around his skull, and he wore, as ever, a frayed brown suit that was too small for him.

Suit and skin both, Louis thought, and called out to Michael. 'How we doing today?'

Michael did not look up to reply but he opened his mouth ever so slightly and little white bubbles appeared at the corners of his lips.

'Glad to hear it,' Louis said, and placing a hand on Michael's arm guided him to the table nearest the door. Michael came to the café every day and he always had a good cup of coffee and a warm meal inside him before it closed. Louis made sure of that.

'I'll go get your drink,' he said. 'Black, no sugar, just how you like it.'

Once, a while ago, that had been how Michael liked his coffee, and Louis always assumed Michael's tastes had remained steady since then.

The coffee brewer and the grill were all open to view behind the counter, which ran the full length of one side of the café. The tables for the customers were laid out in a line against the wall opposite, a dozen of them, each seating four regular folk or six skinny folk.

It was rare, though, for a table to be full. Most times people sat by themselves, taking a break from the highway, and if they came back a second time it was because their bladders were full or their throats were dry and there was Louis' place, still standing by the side of the road.

Louis put a quarter-pounder on the grill and started to chop some onions. A while back, when he'd been capable, Michael had expressed a liking for a burger, and so it was a burger Louis served him every day.

As the meat began to crackle, Louis heard a vehicle slowing. And through his grease-streaked window he watched as the bus from the city pulled to a halt across the street.

A young man strode down the steps of the bus, a bag slung over his shoulder. He didn't look back at the driver, or mouth a word of thanks for the ride, but stood there and lit a cigarette.

He was nothing, Louis thought, a punk, and Louis had seen plenty of punks in his time.

The bus moved off, leaving the punk.

Louis reached under the counter and took out a sheet of card with the words *Help Wanted* hand-written on it, and placed it in the window so that its legend could be read from the street.

You're a dead man.

That's what he should have said to the driver when he'd told Will he wasn't going any further on the ticket he had.

After all, he was a dangerous man now, a fugitive who you didn't want to mess with.

Billy Jones knew that. He'd kicked down Will's door last night and demanded payment of the debt Will owed. Will had been on his knees in front of the fridge trying to hack a pizza slice out of the iced-up freezer compartment with a bread knife, and had only thrown his arms up meaning to defend himself from the sudden attack.

He'd been as surprised as Billy to see the bread knife slipping into the soft flesh of Billy's throat.

Been an accident, a bloody nightmare, but Will knew Billy's brother, John, wouldn't see it that way. So Will had no choice. He had to get out of town, and had used the last of his money to buy that half-assed ticket.

Will threw his cigarette down and his lips curled up into a smile. Now he'd had chance to think about it, he was glad he'd killed Billy. It was going to be a turning point in his life, a fresh start.

What he would do, he figured, was lay low for a while, get some savings built up, maybe enough to even leave the country and buy the strip joint he'd always dreamed of running.

Will looked around, sighed. This retard small town was as good a place as any to start on his new life, he decided.

First, he had to become an employed man.

Will crossed the street and opened the door of the café with the sole of his boot. It was even more of a toilet inside than out. Two, three losers sat by themselves at a row of brown plastic tables next to a glass wall, a big freakin' mirror that looked like it hadn't been wiped clean in years, leaving the reflections of the people and the tables Will could see in it pretty hazy. And there were dirty cups and plates on most of the unoccupied tables as well.

Whoever ran this place was a slob. Will guessed it was the old man wearing a food-stained apron perched on a stool behind the counter.

Will grinned at him. 'Sign says you're looking for paid help.'

The old man considered this like it was some kind of mystery of the universe, and Will was about ready to walk out when he finally got a reply.

'You ever waited tables before?'

'Sure,' Will lied. 'Plenty.'

And the old man nodded and handed Will an apron as dirty as the one he wore. Will slung it over his shoulder.

Old fool, he thought. When he was ready to move on he'd help himself to a bonus from the till, maybe leave the old man a present on the floor as well. A steaming brown farewell.

Trade for the rest of that day was slow and steady.

Had been the day before, and would be the next day, Louis knew. It was enough, and though he doubted he'd ever be able to afford to retire, neither would he be dying of a heart attack with stress, like them city high fliers.

His new waiter didn't look likely to work himself into an early grave either. The punk had spent most of his time helping himself to drinks on the house, and the only people he had waited on, a young couple, pretty folk too, had stormed out after the punk suggested to the lady she should leave her beau and come out back for time with a real man.

Louis would speak to the punk later, tell him to keep a civil tongue in his head while he was around the customers. It was closing up time now, though, and Louis went over to his last remaining customer, Michael, and said, 'Time to go home. Come on, I'll give you a hand.'

Louis noticed the punk, slouched at one of the tables watching, but didn't expect for a moment he'd offer to help.

Young people, they didn't care.

Well, Louis thought, as he led Michael towards the door, Maybe he'll learn one day what it's like to be feeble.

With Michael safely out on the street and pointed in the direction of his night digs in the basement of the local church, Louis locked the door and flipped the *Open* sign to *Closed*. Then he turned to face the punk. 'You come behind the counter now,' he said.

The punk stayed-put, a sneer on his face.

Louis wasn't impressed. 'You want your wage, I ain't going to walk all the way over there with it from the till.'

That did the trick, as Louis knew it would, and the punk sauntered over as if he owned the place.

He rested his skinny butt on Louis' stool and said, 'Once you paid me I'm done for the day. I ain't putting away those dirty dishes.'

The tables had not been cleared all day and were covered in used cups and saucers, plates, knives and forks. It was pretty disgusting, and the reflection of the used cutlery in the mirror only made it look worse.

'I'm not going to ask you to,' Louis said. He glanced up at the clock on the wall above his stool. It was one minute to ten. 'And I never will. The only thing I insist you do at the end of every day is to make sure you're standing behind this counter before that clock says it's ten on the dot.'

The boy looked at Louis as if he was crazy or done something disgusting like wetting his pants.

Despite his age, Louis had all his wits about him. He knew the way the world turned on its axis, and plenty more besides.

He heard a faint click as the hands of the clock moved to show the hour, and watched as the room and everything in it beyond the counter shimmered. Then, accompanied by a slapping sound like a rubber band makes when it's pulled tight then released, the interior of the café snapped back into focus.

Everything was as it had been before, except the tables, which were now empty.

On this side of the glass only. The tables Louis could see in the mirror were still covered in dirty cups and plates and all the other remains of meals and drinks enjoyed during the day.

Louis nodded his head approvingly, as he did nightly at this little miracle.

The punk's mouth hung open like the muscles that usually held it shut had been cut clean through. Finally, he managed to stammer, 'W...w...what happened?'

'The tables been cleared. That's all you need know, that, and to heed my warning. You hear me, boy.'

Now when the punk looked at Louis there was something approaching respect in his expression.

'Good,' Louis said. 'There's a spare room upstairs. You can bunk down there for the night. I'll wake you in the morning.'

He woke with a crick in his neck from sleeping on bare wooden floorboards. Uncomfortable as he was, Will didn't want to move.

There was stuff going on here that was too weird, and though he liked the idea of not having to clear away the dishes, the way they'd disappeared but could still be seen in the mirror freaked him out.

A knock on the door made him jump.

'Time to go to work, boy,' the old man called out, and Will reluctantly dragged himself to his feet.

Entering the café he had a new surprise in store. The cups and plates had

reappeared on the tables, only now they were all clean, and brilliantly so. They actually sparkled.

And Will could see the same cups and plates in the same place on the tables through the glass, like an ordinary reflection in an ordinary mirror again.

‘They came back washed,’ he said.

‘Sure did,’ the old man said. ‘Now collect them up and stack them on the shelf above the grill. Come on boy, start doing the job I hired you for.’ And he fixed Will with a pretty mean stare.

Which made Will want to tell the old man where to put his job. But he hesitated.

Maybe the trick with the dishes wasn’t the only weird thing about this place, and Will didn’t want to risk waking up to find he’d sprouted a tail or been shrunk to the size of a fly because he’d crossed its owner.

While Will was considering these unpleasant prospects the door opened and the saddest case Will had ever seen in his life stumbled inside. Will remembered the man been in here last night. He looked about one step up the evolutionary ladder than those human vegetables that eventually get unplugged when their families get bored of visiting them in hospital.

Will was amazed to see the care the old man took escorting the loser to a seat and getting him settled. Then, whistling cheerfully and tunelessly, the old man started to fry up some burgers.

Will sidled up to the old man and whispered. ‘He afford to pay for that?’

‘It’s on the house,’ the old man replied.

Which was no way to run a business, Will knew. There’d be no freebies when he had his strip joint. But he decided to keep his mouth shut.

Size of a fly, he told himself, and helped himself to a slice of cake.

Closing time; though the cars still drifted along the highway, and bladders still yearned to be emptied and thirsts slaked, ten o’ clock was approaching and Louis needed to bolt his door against the world.

He sent Michael on his way, locked up and went to count the takings from the till. He was happy enough to do that now with the punk watching, confident enough there wasn’t going to be no assault and battery on him for the purpose of theft.

Though the punk had one eye on the bills as Louis took them out of the grip of the till, he was clearly preoccupied with less worldly matters than money as he walked up and down the aisle, in-between the counter and the tables, which were once again covered at the end of the day in dirty dishes.

The notes divided into short piles by denomination, Louis glanced up at the clock and said: ‘You need to come behind the counter now.’

The punk kept pacing and, surprising Louis by being able to walk and talk, piped up, ‘You got to tell me why, man.’

Nervous, because time was moving on, Louis replied, ‘Because at ten o’clock the dishes are taken ... into the mirror, behind the mirror ... Hell, I don’t know

the right way to explain it, but I do know there's no way to get at them to bring them back. I've tried. You just got to wait till the morning when they'll jump back out and onto the tables clean as can be.'

The punk punched the air. 'Wicked. No washing up ever.'

'Something like that. So you going to do as I ask, and come behind the counter.'

'No chance, I want to see this up close and personal.'

'No you don't. Again, I don't understand the rhyme and reason why, but if you're standing on that side of the counter you'll be taken with the dirty dishes.'

The punk stopped pacing and looked at Louis. 'You say that like it's happened to your hired help before.'

Louis nodded solemn as he knew how. 'It has.'

'Was they killed?'

'No.'

'And did they come back in the morning from that side of the glass to this, like the dishes?'

'They came back.'

'So what's the big deal?'

Louis sighed. 'Come back behind the counter and I'll tell you about the last man foolish enough to not get behind the counter when he was asked.'

And Louis thought the punk was going to do as asked, but a look of terror suddenly appeared on his face. Then he ducked down, rolled onto a seat and lay there, hidden under a table.

'No!' Louis cried out, as the hands of the clock swung towards the hour.

Sweet Jesus, but that was close.

Will had seen him just in time.

The fat neck, pig eyes, and Hawaiian shirt. John Jones was not an easy man to miss.

But Will almost had, and then he glimpsed out of the corner of his eye Billy Jones' brother walking towards the door of the café.

He hadn't seen Will. Will was convinced of that. All he needed to do was stay out of sight for a few minutes and John Jones would discover the café was closed and leave.

Wishing that he could see the door to check if the coast was clear yet, Will let out a quiet whistle.

He hoped that it was just a coincidence, that John Jones had stopped at the café on his way to somewhere else, and not that he'd called round because he knew Will was holed up here.

As the minutes passed and he didn't hear the sound of wood splintering and glass breaking as John kicked the door through, Will grew more confident that John was there by chance.

Finally Will got up the courage to peek out from under the table. The door was in one piece and the street outside was empty.



John Jones had gone. Will was safe.

He crawled out from under the table, and made a point of stretching and yawning, wanting to act cool in front of the old man.

But the old man wasn't there.

The counter, the café was deserted. And on the tables the dirty dishes hadn't moved. Will looked over to the clock.

It was five-past-ten.

Louis made himself a coffee and settled on his stool. From the pouch in his apron he got out some rolling tobacco and made himself a cigarette.

Smoking was a filthy habit but sometimes he needed to.

The stupid punk. Why hadn't he listened!

On the other side of the glass the punk was turning round, probably looking for Louis, wondering where he'd gone. It was clear that the punk couldn't see through the glass from the side he was on.

Louis didn't know why that was. It was one of the many mysteries to him about the glitch in the fabric of the world that every night took his dirty dishes onto the other side of the glass and washed them. It had been happening since he bought this place fifty years ago and he guessed it always would.

And there was no harm in it, if only punks would learn to listen.

He wouldn't stop giving them jobs because of this, though, and in the morning he would put the *Help Wanted* sign in the window again.

Most of the punks he'd taken on over the years had straightened out their acts while they were working there, in no small part due to the glitch. Louis figured it opened their eyes to the fact there was more in the world than being angry and selfish, and he usually said goodbye to his waiters with a fatherly handshake and a blessing for a good future as they headed for the bus.

Sometime, though, things didn't work out.

The punk was pacing up and down the aisles again, stopping now and then to pick up a dirty coffee cup. He didn't look to have worked out what had happened yet.

Louis crushed the last of his cigarette between his fingers and wiped his tired eyes. There was nothing he could do for the punk.

He was standing at the glass now, holding his hands against it and yelling.

Louis couldn't hear him.

Perhaps the punk realised this, or perhaps he just gave up, because he walked away from the glass and went to sit at one of the tables.

He was dripping with sweat and starting to get real red in the face. It was getting hot in there, Louis knew. Soon it would be boiling.

Where the punk had placed his hands on the glass there were damp handprints, but they were disappearing now as the glass steamed up.

Louis lowered himself off his stool. His bad leg was aching and he needed to go lie down. It had been a long day, and tomorrow would be just as long and he wasn't a young man no more.

Louis waved when he saw Michael shuffling along the pavement and went to open the door for him.

‘How you doing today, my friend?’ he asked as he led Michael to his regular seat. ‘I got a special treat for you today. Michael, this here is William.’

Like peas in a pod, thought Louis as he manoeuvred Michael into the seat opposite William. Both been punks, both could’ve moved on and up in life, but neither of them listened.

From behind the counter, Louis called out, ‘Coffee, black, no sugar, just like you both like it.’

In the morning sunlight Will’s wrinkled skin and shrunken clothes sparkled.

‘And burgers,’ Louis added cheerfully. ‘Everyone likes burgers.’

Will opened his mouth, looked for a moment as if he was trying to speak, but no sound came out, only a bubble that floated slowly towards the ceiling where it hung for a moment, a silver, soapy orb, then burst.

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The Friday Afternoon Button

Chris Leaper

He took a deep breath, glanced down briefly at his lap, and then back up at her, opening his mouth to speak. Penelope, *Lady Penelope*, with her power-suited shoulders and relaxed, yet assertive stance, newly promoted to being *his* boss, stared calmly back at him.

'Look,' he began falteringly, 'I- I- I know I've lost my way with this work a bit, but—'

'I would say you haven't really lost your way, have you Robert. It has been a few months since you took it on,' she interrupted smoothly.

A few months. Half a year, actually. It was one of those projects that he had hoped would just quietly go away if he buried it at the bottom of his in-tray. It was coming up to discreet disposal time when she had turned around one day and asked him, oh so sweetly, if they could discuss progress. Bitch.

Her interruption momentarily threw him, and he could feel his prepared *spiel* flitting out of the window. She took advantage of his hesitation to flex her assertive management techniques.

'I think we need to resolve this quickly, Robert. I want you to bring it to completion by Wednesday. I've got several other projects that I want you to start working on. As you know we're coming to a crucial time of the year and I expect everyone to pull together to get through this.' As she spoke she fingered the small expensive-looking crucifix which hung from a chain around her neck. Rob thought it might have been bought with her new and improved pay-packet. *To the victor, the spoils*, he thought cynically, and felt a sudden spasm of anger.

'Oh, I appreciate that,' he countered, trying to seize some ground back, 'It's just that I have got a few things on and—'

'Rob. We are busy, and you know, this extra work you have *should* have been resolved a long time ago. We all have a few things on at the moment.'

A momentary silence. He had no response to that. There was to be no conceding from her, and he had no real cards left to play. As always. He nodded slowly -the dog exposing it's belly- and sat there in silence, contrite. She gave him the sweetest of victory smiles and put her head on one side, her eyes positively *sparkling*.

'Let's leave it there, shall we? I'm going to stay down here and talk to Scott,

and I'll see you back upstairs.' She raised her eyebrows at him and nodded her head at the same time. Dismissed. He smiled weakly, pushed back his chair, got up and went out.

His shoulders slumped as he trudged down the shabby, dimly-lit corridor to the lifts, passing office doors at regular intervals, and he sighed heavily. *For God's sake!* Didn't he have enough on his plate at the moment without her nipping his head as well? What he needed was to get out of this shite-hole for once and for all.

The thought occurred to him to pull a sicky. Why not? It had been done before, by greater men than him. Sure it was obvious, but in a place like this people did it all the time. And it didn't seem to affect *their* promotions. He went through the double doors at the end of the corridor- big and wooden, like all the others in this drab grey building- and round the corner to the lifts. He approached the control panel on the wall and punched the '↑' button, which would summon the lift to this floor. There was a short wait, while he stood there, hands in pockets, and then the lift 'pinged' and the doors slid open in front of him. '*Seventh floor,*' the feminine voice of the lift intoned, and he stepped inside. There was no-one else occupying the lift. Thank goodness; he had a fart that needed letting go after keeping it in all through the meeting. *Bloody rickety lifts.*

He turned, to the control panel located to the right of the door, finger automatically extending to push the button that would send him up to his own floor. And then stopped. Something was different about the lift today. He looked, and then looked closer. The buttons. It was the buttons. There was—

There was an extra button.

Just above the rows of tarnished buttons with their combination numbers and braille, there was an extra one, on it's own; this one shiny, seemingly untouched by human fingers. It bore the legend 'Friday P.M' in raised lettering. He gazed at it in puzzlement, whilst the lift doors remained open, awaiting his command. He glanced at the corridor outside, but there was no-one there, and looked back at the button. It wasn't a false one that had been taped onto the panel, was it? No. There were no visible signs of fabrication. He glanced up at the corners of the ceiling — *hidden cameras?* — and then back at the button. It seemed to glow gently, unlike the thin red light that was produced whenever the others were pressed. He brushed the tip of his finger gingerly against the raised surface. Yes, it *was* there. And still the doors remained open. There was absolutely no-one approaching this usually busy lift. It was as if time was waiting upon him.

He breathed in deeply, and pressed the button firmly.

The doors slid shut, the rattle obscuring the voice of the lift. Cables creaked, and he felt the lift being drawn up. He held his breath, a half-smile still on his face. The lift continued upwards for a couple of heartbeats, then shuddered to a stop. The voice intoned '*ninth floor,*' and the doors slid open. He cautiously stepped out.

'Hi Rob, y'alright?' called Hilary, one of the office workers as she hustled

past him into the lift.

'Aye, not so bad,' he replied automatically, turning to watch her step inside. He lingered, waiting to see her reaction when she noticed the extra button, but she was too quick for him, and the doors slid shut. He remained staring at the closed doors for a few seconds more, then pivoted on his foot and slowly walked away, his brow furrowed in concentration.

He trod slowly down the corridor, looking up and down, and all around him. Everything looked the same. That cardboard box was still outside the Planning office door. The greasy coffee stain from the morning was still spattered along the tiles. Nothing had changed. It was all a con. An elaborate set-up. Or maybe it was his exhausted brain, telling him that this horrible place had finally reduced him to hallucinations. He managed a brief wistful smile to himself. *I should be so lucky*, he thought. Well, as he hadn't started to drool yet, there was still time to get the contents of his in-tray sorted to Her Ladyship's satisfaction. And he shuffled on down the corridor, to where a door was opening ahead of him.

It was David, one of the newish Assistant Directors. He raised his eyebrows at Rob and smiled briefly. Rob nodded back in greeting, and then half-turned as he passed to regard the AD's retreating back. *Funny*. Wasn't he wearing a mulberry coloured shirt, with a gun-metal tie this morning?

Oh bugger it, he thought, and shook his head. *I need to go to the loo, and sit down for a while.*

In a short while, he made his way along to the open-plan office he shared with about twenty others, and over to his desk, which was one of a cluster of seven. Dom, his colleague, who was frowning at a monitor screen, muttered 'How do', as he sat down. Rob looked, and looked again. Now he definitely *was* wearing a different shirt to the one he had on this morning. First it was a pale yellow, now a dark blue. With a black and white-striped tie. He stared darkly at the back of Dom's head, wondering if he was the butt of some practical joke. His gaze moved round to the empty desks. 'Where are the others?'

'Oh, they're all still on lunch. Should be back fairly soon.'

'Right.' A pause. 'Penelope?' He made a gesture toward the Leaderene's desk.

Dom paused before answering. 'No, nothing's turned up yet. The Police will be coming back soon, won't they? We'll probably be first up, seeing as though we're her team.'

'*Eh?*' Rob uttered sharply. '*Police?*' But Dom didn't hear him, as his phone buzzed at that moment, and he picked up the receiver to take the call. Rob stared into space, then turned to look at his own monitor. It was open at a word document. He minimised it, then automatically clicked over to his e-mail page, to see what he had received.

He looked at the very top e-mail. From Accounting. Something tedious with a file attached. He looked across at the date – 17th March.

17th March. Friday 17th March.

That's—

It was—

But it was Tuesday today.

It was Tuesday.

You couldn't post-date e-mails could you? No, because the date was automatically generated when the e-mail was sent.

Had, then, the lift worked?

His eyes drifted over the e-mails. All familiar names, familiar subjects. He counted them. He had received eight on the 17th, about the same on the 16th, and a few on the 15th.

There was one, from the 15th, that caught his eye. It was from Mike, the big boss, titled 'Penelope Hardcastle'. It looked like he'd already read it – it was no longer in bold. He clicked it back open;

Dear Colleagues,

I'm sure by now that most of you will be aware of the circumstances surrounding Penelope Hardcastle. The Police have become increasingly concerned for her safety, and will shortly be making a public appeal for information, as well as carrying out more interviews. It goes without saying that our thoughts are with her family at this difficult time, and I would ask you all to co-operate fully with the Police enquiries.

Mike Lightfoot.

He sat slowly back in his chair. Read through the e-mail; once, twice again. *My God*, he thought. *Someone's done away with Her Ladyship*. Jesus. An incredulous smile touched his lips, which he quickly masked in case anyone was looking. No, that's not right; think of her family. Her husband, Mark, who always seemed OK whenever he spoke to him on the phone. And her two young kids. She talked about them quite often. A bit too often for his liking, mind you, like they were some kind of ... *golden* children or something. But still. How must they be feeling?

An image formed in his mind, of him encased inside a lift, spinning through a swirling vortex, and across galaxies and outer space, *like bloody Doctor Who in his TARDIS!* He snorted, causing Dom to look up briefly. He reset the expression on his face.

For the rest of that afternoon, he pushed paper around his desk in a pretence of work. His mind was a whirl, and he pondered again and again the Friday afternoon button. How on earth did it work? Had anybody else in the department seen it, or even used it? Was it there regularly, or did it only manifest itself to 'troubled souls'? Would it appear again?

He looked at the digital clock in the corner of his monitor, and smirked. *'I got*

you, sucker' he whispered, and bent his head as the smile appeared once more. Oh, the possibilities.

He accepted the usual invitation for the Friday after-work drink, and a small group of them repaired to the nearest bar. The talk consisted of the usual things; sports, girls at work that they fancied, the latest office gossip, but that evening he found that the topics held little interest for him. His mind was otherwise engaged. After two or three pints, he bade the others a vague farewell, and set off home.

He soon arrived at the small terrace house that was his. As he fumbled for his keys, he experienced a sense of unease, of slight panic. He pushed the front door key into the lock and stopped, glancing all round him. Why should he feel fear on his own doorstep? It was irrational, but that didn't lessen the feeling. He opened the door, and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

He pushed open the door to his living room, and walked through to the kitchen, where he flicked the switch on the top of the electric kettle. *Must clean that sometime.* While it boiled, he took out the coffee jar from the cupboard and spooned coffee into a clean mug; added sugar, and took the milk out from the fridge. He also took out a small jar from his pocket, twisted the lid off, and shook a tiny white pill out which he placed in with the contents of the mug.

The kettle was boiling. He flicked the switch off and filled the mug three-quarters full, topping it up with milk. He walked back through to the living room where Penelope, relaxed, assertive, and now dead, lay in the middle of the floor, eyes staring sightlessly up at the ceiling and her face and neck covered with a stiff mask of deep crimson, the steak knife still protruding from her throat. He sat down opposite her and took a sip of coffee.

'Well now, Lady Penelope, what *are* we going to do with you?'

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